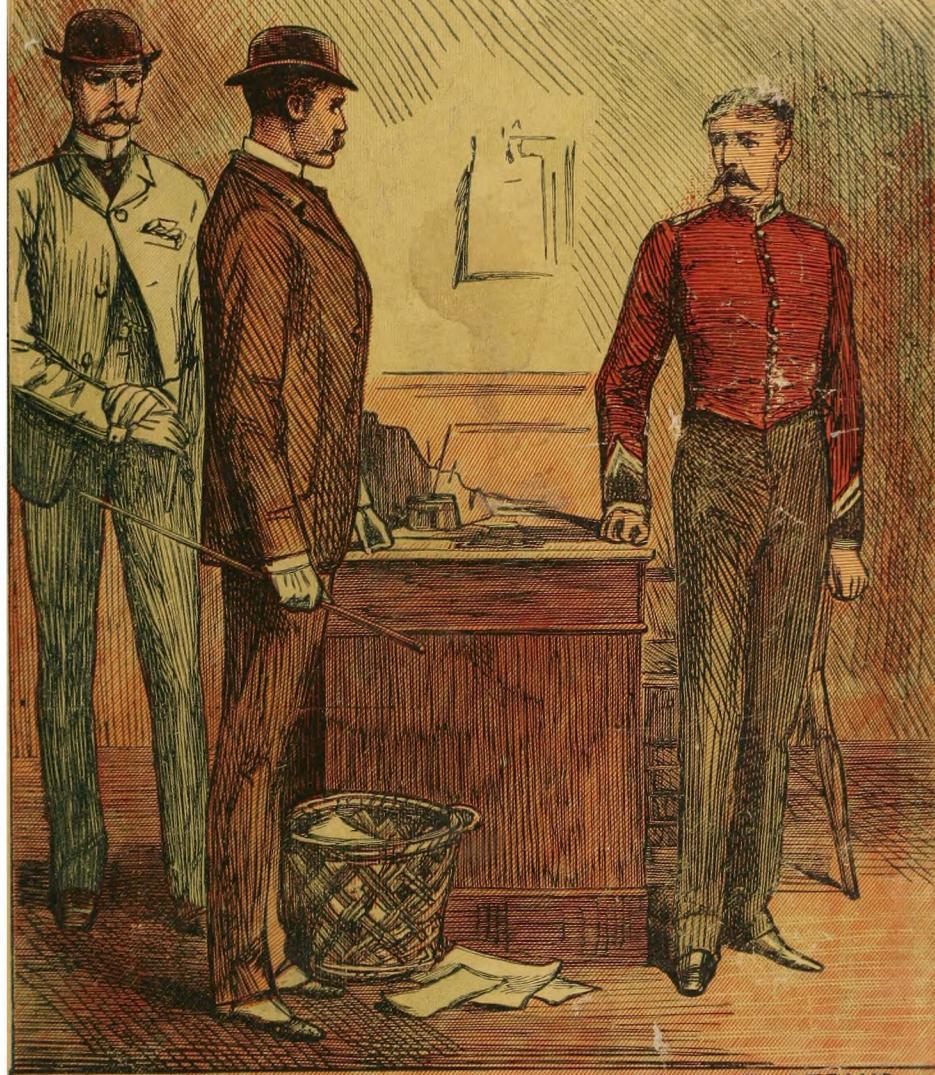


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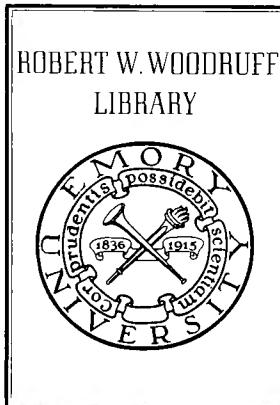
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Gathered in Blankhampton.



CHAPTER I.

“SHE’S A’ I’ THE WARLD TAE ME.”

“Marriage is like a man taking a leap in the dark, in which he may chance to alight upon his feet, and be in comparative safety or, on the contrary, be dashed to pieces.”

—BALZAC.

WHEN Lord Charterhouse came to the conclusion that he did not want to marry Polly Antrobus, he also decided that he would send in his papers forthwith, go up to Town and ask his cousin, Lady Nell Temple, to marry him at once. But, when morning light came upon him, he did not quite carry out that programme; he changed his mind. Not about Lady Nell. No. His mind had in reality been made up about *her* for ages, ever since they had been tiny dots of bairns. But his people and her people had both found out that such a marriage would be a very desirable end for the two families to

work to, and as this fact had been dinned into his ears ever since he left Eton and began to think about the army, Lord Charterhouse had, not unnaturally, been rather against the scheme than for it. Not against Lady Nell! Oh, no! *that* he had never been at any period of his two-and-twenty years of existence.

But he did change his mind about leaving the army.

“Hang it all!” he said to himself as he felt the edge of his razor that morning, “Hang it all! it’s downright mean to go clearing out of the service before I say a word to Nell. She was always so keen on ‘following the drum,’ as she called it. No; I think I’ll give her the chance of a year or two’s service before I send in my papers.”

So he went straight off to the office and asked Urquhart for three days’ leave, which he got, whereupon he went gaily off to Town and made his way to a certain pretty little creeper-covered house in Queen’s Gate, where he put the question to Lady Nell, plump and straight, and then went more gaily off to New Bond Street to buy an engagement ring. For Lady Nell said “Yes!”

And then--Lady Nell having utterly scouted the idea of leaving the service for at least a year or two --he returned to Blankhampton, and neither said nor, for the matter of that, thought anything more about sending in his papers.

He arrived about half-an-hour before dinner-time, to find, naturally, the ante-room deserted. So

he went off to his quarters and dressed for mess, and then, having ten minutes to spare, looked in upon Lester Brookes, who said :

“ Hullo, Winks ! Is that you ? How are you, old chap ? ”

“ Pretty fit, thanks,” returned Mr. Winks—they invariably called him “ Mr. Winks ” or “ Winks ” among themselves in the Black Horse—“ What's the news ? ”

“ News ? Oh ! well — er — Orford's done it at last.”

“ Done what ? ”

“ He's going to be married.”

“ Orford ? By Jove ! you don't mean it. And a very good thing, too, for him. Who's the lady ? ”

“ Miss Trafford.”

“ Miss—Traff—ord ? Nonsense ! That must be about as true as the Colonel's engagement to the little mother,” cried Mr. Winks, incredulously.

“ It's true enough. Orford announced it himself the other night after dinner ; but it's not one of Mrs. Traff's daughters. It's the niece.”

“ Oh ! the niece. Ah ! well, of course that makes it rather different. Still, I shouldn't exactly care to marry into that family myself.”

“ Blankhampton families are all pretty much of a muchness,” remarked Brookes with a meaning air.

“ Yes ; I daresay. I shouldn't quite care to marry into any Blankhampton family,” said Mr.

Winks coolly. “By-the-bye, I *am* going to be married, almost at once.”

“The deuce you are? And who’s the lady?” asked Brookes, who, like many another of the units constituting “Sassietty” in the old city, had been wondering for weeks past whether Lord Charterhouse really would take the plunge and raise Polly Antrobus to the peerage or not, and now felt not a little surprised to hear that there was a rival in the field. “Who’s the lady?” he asked.

“My cousin, Lady Nell Temple,” answered Lord Charterhouse promptly.

“By Jove! Well, old fellow, I heartily congratulate you, hope you’ll be awfully happy and all that,” Brookes cried; and then they shook hands over the news, and Mr. Winks said:

“Thanks—thanks old fellow, I’m sure.”

There was the usual little pause, half of shyness half of awkwardness, which always seems to fall upon Englishmen after any little touch of sentiment or small display of feeling, the sort of pause which a couple of Frenchmen would fill up by kissing one another. And then Mr. Winks suggested that they would be late for mess, whereupon they went off to the mess-room with a sigh of relief, each of them.

It still wanted ten minutes to the dinner-hour when they reached the verandah of the ante-room, where they found seven or eight officers, who hailed Mr. Winks with a sharp fire of chaff.

“Why, Winks,” cried Orford gaily, “what joy to

see you back again. My dear chap, she's been looking for you morning, noon, and night like the personification of Ophelia. She only needed her yellow hair hanging in dishevelled masses about her fair cheeks, and a few straws and wild flowers, to be quite perfect for the part.”

“I'm sorry for that, whoever she is,” returned Mr. Winks coolly, “for I am not at all inclined to take the part of Hamlet, in fact, I'm cast for another *rôle* altogether.”

The remark was taken up and commented upon instantly.

“Cast for another *rôle*?” repeated Dayrell. “Why, Mr. Winks, you don't mean——”

“Of course he does,” cried Staunton with a laugh. “Have you been home to ask your mother's leave, Winks?”

“You shouldn't have gone up and asked her,” laughed St. Maur. “You should have got her to come to Blankhampton, and be introduced to the whole family here. Lady Charterhouse would then have been able to take the whole bearings of the proposition.”

To all of which Mr. Winks listened with unruffled demeanour, and presently electrified everybody at the dinner table, excepting Lester Brookes, by rising in his place and saying :

“Gentlemen, I have the honour to announce to you my engagement to my cousin, Lady Nell Temple.”

By which the officers of the Black Horse became

aware that Polly Antrobus had had one more practical experience of the old saw which says, “There’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip.”

“By-the-bye,” said Marcus Orford, after a while, to Lester Brookes, “I heard a piece of news in the town to-day. The second Miss Antrobus is going to be married.”

“By Jove! Going to be married? You don’t say so. To whom?”

“Some man called—er—Brentham; Herrick Brentham.”

“Not a Blankhampton man, surely?”

“Oh, no. Someone she’s met away from here. And, I hear, an awfully good match; fellow seems to be rolling in money, and desirable in every way; six feet high, and very handsome—so the old lady says—utterly devoted to To-To, and they’re going to be married in about six weeks.”

“By Jove! Imagine any fellow *wanting* to marry that little bag of bones. Of course she’s very pretty—I don’t know if she isn’t almost as pretty as her sister. But I always thought she was booked to Devreux of the Yellow Horse.”

“Not a bit of it,” with a laugh. “I met him in St. James’s the last time I was in Town, and asked him outright—because, you know, it seemed to me, knowing him well, about the most unlikely marriage, or at least engagement, I’d ever heard of. Well, Devreux simply laughed in my face, asked me if my wits had gone wool-gathering, or if I thought he was a lunatic? Oh, no, I fancy the Brentham man

had quite a clear field. Anyway, he's going to marry her, that's certain."

"You haven't seen him yet?"

"No; I only heard of it this afternoon," Orford answered.

"I see. Well, I think I shall go and call to-morrow and hear all details. By-the-bye, did you ever hear that joke about Sinclair of the 28th?"

"No, I've heard of Sinclair, of course," Orford replied, "but never in connection with the fair Polly. What was it?"

"Mrs. Fairlie told me—she don't care much about Mrs. Antrobus; by-the-bye, I don't fancy she cares much about anybody in Blankhampton, at least, one always seems to get the last bit of gossip and the least-known stories about everyone from her. Well, it seems that after Mrs. Antrobus's bad shot at the Trelawneys and Taff Pierrepont, she determined to eschew officers' wives entirely for the future, and therefore, sent old Antrobus to call on the mess of the 28th and stayed at home herself, just like a fat old spider in a web. You know the style of thing—'Will you walk into my parlour?' and all that! Well, in time, two very likely-looking flies made their appearance and inspected the parlour, admired the fair Polly, of course, and took stock of the benignant old lady in the corner. Then one backed out, and thought he didn't feel inclined to go in any further—must have been a cautious young gentle-

man, who felt himself safest just then outside the web of holy matrimony.

“But the other, a big, overpowering bluebottle, as full of importance as you please (and, between ourselves, doesn’t that hit off Sinclair to a T?)—and as Mrs. Fairlie put it, ‘a big, well set-up fellow, with a straight nose, and a pair of melancholy eyes,’ not only ventured in, but fell down at Polly’s feet and—*grovelled!*”

“Mrs. Hugh, as Mrs. Fairlie calls her, was radiant at the result of her skilful generalship. What mattered past defeats, when they were swallowed up in victory? What mattered the bygone fogs and mists, when the glorious sunshine of achievement had come to sweep them away for ever? What did she care for the failures of yesterday, when the successes of to-day amply compensated for all unpleasantnesses and vexations? In short, to put Mrs. Hugh’s reflections into less grandiloquent but more everyday language than she generally goes in for, she evidently didn’t care a little hang for all that was gone by, the Cardellas, the Trelawneys, and Taff Pierrepont all put together; but she just worked away at her parlour and cleared away every relic—wings and legs, so to speak—of former victims, escaped or defunct. And she gathered dew-drops to brighten odd corners, and coaxed in little rays of sunshine to brighten big bluebottle’s eyes, while Polly looked pretty and said nothing.

“‘Such a *comfort* to me,’ said Mrs. Hugh one

day in her blandest tones to Mrs. Fairlie, as they sat under the veranda in sweet *al fresco* friendship and watched big Bluebottle philandering about the garden with Polly, ‘that Polly has never been *in-duced* to avail herself of the really *mag-nificent* opportunities that have been held out to her of establishing herself. Captain Sin-claiah is *so* charming, such a *per-fect* gentleman, and *madly in* love with her, that I feel he is the *only* man in the world who would be able to make her happy. Indeed, I am *per-fectly* satisfied in *ev-ery* way.’

“‘Then they are engaged?’ said Mrs. Fairlie, wondering that she hadn't heard of it earlier.

“‘No; *not* yet,’ Mrs. Hugh replied. ‘He has not yet spoken *plainly* to her; but we are *quite* satisfied. He is negotiating for the Willoughbys' house, just as it stands. He means to use it as a hunting-box after the regiment leaves Blank-hampton, and, of course, that will be very pleasant for us.’

“Well—it really was too bad; but you've seen a great, big, blundering bluebottle go bang into a delicate web, and after knocking about for a time, go buzzing and blundering out again, leaving Madame Spider with her web all torn and ruined and never a morsel of dinner—you've seen that, old fellow, haven't you? Well, that's just what Sinclair did with Mrs. Hugh. For no sooner had he satisfactorily concluded his negotiations for the purchase of the house Mrs. Hugh had spoken of, and got her to find him servants and other things,

than he just went quietly off to Cannes on a ten days' leave, and came back at the end of it with a pretty, delicate wife, and two pretty little children to live in it! And after that, Mrs. Fairlie declares that, so far as Army society was concerned, Mrs. Hugh threw up the sponge."

"It's a very fine story," said Orford laughing; "but, all the same, Mrs. Fairlie has got mixed somewhere, for we relieved the Yellow Horse here; and you know Sinclair was in the Line, he was D.A.Q.A.G."

"So he was. Well, but that was the tale as she told it to me. I thought it uncommonly good."

"Oh! uncommonly good. Mrs. Fairlie is a good hand at that sort of thing. She'll tell 'em about you and me when we've gone. Bless me, how I do dislike that woman, to be sure."

"She's not a very attractive woman. By-the-bye, I wonder what fun she can find in going long country walks with old Coles?"

"I wonder what fun old Coles can find in going with her?" Orford growled.

"That's all right enough, but, hang it all, old Coles is so bad on his feet. It's quite painful to walk down the street with him," said Brookes, feelingly.

"Yes, he is queer about his feet," returned Orford, then laughed outright. "By Jove! but the two must be a study to follow down the road. I've never seen them together. Why, her feet are just like Mrs. Hugh's, and Mrs. Hugh's are a feature—a feature! It was only the other day that Mr. Winks and

I were going to the club together, when Mrs. Hugh fell foul of us and marched him on in front, leaving Polly to me. We hadn't gone many yards when Polly suddenly exclaimed: ‘Dear me, Captain Orford, doesn't mamma look just like a tortoise?’ I was struck all of a heap, for I didn't like to say yes, and my conscience wouldn't let me say no. ‘Pon my word, Mrs. Fairlie and old Coles must be a study!’”

“They got old Coles to sing at the Residence last night,” said Brookes, chuckling over his comrade's remarks.

“Old Coles?—by Jove!”

“And he sang ‘Annie Laurie.’”

“No!”

“Yes—true.

“Like dew on the gowan lying
Is the fa' of her fairy feet,
And like winds in summer sighing,
Her voice is low and sweet.
Her voice is low and sweet,
And she's a' i' the warld tae me,
And for bonny Annie Laurie,
Wad I lay me doun an' dee.”

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN OF ACTION.

"A virtuous mind in a fair body is indeed a fine picture in a good light, and therefore it is no wonder that it makes the beautiful sex all over charms."

—ADDISON.

PERHAPS never had the good folk of Blankhampton been so tickled by curiosity as they were about the latest bit of news that had spread over the town, or so really awed as they were by the details which came to light concerning the engagement and approaching marriage of To-To Antrobus.

The event was not made less important by the information given by the Antrobus family. In the first place, Mr. Herrick Brentham belonged to the higher walks of the legal profession, and, except at Assize times, barristers were not commonly met with in Blankhampton.

It was true he had never held a brief, but then, as Mrs. Hugh put it, a man who has a *large* private property does not care to be tied by the working part of his profession, and, according to her, he held the position of a barrister very much as certain ladies of—of—well, let us say fashion, claim the reputation of being actresses, and think themselves superior to the great heads of the profession because

they do not get their living by it. And in the second place, Mrs. Hugh declared he was wonderfully handsome—at least, not perhaps handsome, but exceedingly distinguished-looking ; he was reported to be capable of picking To-To up bodily, and putting her on the top of a tall cabinet or shelf, there to learn good behaviour, or at least such as pleased him best.

He was very rich—indeed, rolling in money—and could not lavish enough attention and—and promises upon his beautiful little betrothed, whom he described as being like a bit of Dresden china. They intended to live in London eventually, but immediately after the wedding they were going abroad for a year, or at least until the next autumn's yachting season, when they meant to go to the Mediterranean for the winter.

And then somebody asked who Mr. Herrick Brentham was, and of what family he came ? Upon which Mrs. Hugh rose up to the rescue, and elaborately explained matters thus—

The Brenthams were rich—oh ! encrmously rich, quite small millionaires!—with her oiliest laugh. Oh, without doubt To-To was a very lucky girl —every whim would be gratified, every caprice satisfied. Mr. Brentham's father ? Oh, well—er—the fact was, he was—er—a little eccentric—a little *—odd*—with an emphasis upon the word, as if to be a little—*odd* was a rare distinction to which common people could not attain. “But a very charming old gentleman, and all the family are so

delighted with the engagement, for Mr. Brentham—Herrick, that is—is quite a Bohemian, has *the* most Bo-hemian ideas about everything, that he has always declared that, if he fell in love, even with a bar-maid, he should marry her at once. So, of course, the whole family are only too thankful to get him safely married as they would like."

"But *what* or *who is* Mr. Brentham—the father, I mean?" persisted the seeker after information.

"He is—a—a manufacturer; he has very large brickfields, and, I believe, a most extensive property," Mrs. Hugh answered.

Eventually it oozed out that the Brentham, senior, had begun life with the proverbial and traditional twopence-halfpenny, from which all rich self-made men start, that, happily for the social status of his one son and his five daughters, he had become distinctly *odd*, and was therefore saddled by an extra body-servant and kept in the retreat of his own elegant mansion in the neighbourhood of Idleminster; which was a convenient arrangement for all immediately concerned, he being of the good old-fashioned sort who insist upon drinking of out their saucers, and saving their forks at the expense of their knives.

It oozed out, too, that Mrs. Brentham could neither read nor write; but then, as Mrs. Hugh charitably remarked when she came to hear of it, that was no fault of Herrick's, poor fellow, and she, for one, should never make any difference in her manner to him on account of it—which, between

ourselves, was not only very sweet and motherly, but it was also very nice of her to bear in mind the old saying, “The likes of me knows the likes of you.”

However, in spite of any little drawbacks in the way of bygones, there seemed to be no reasonable doubt as to the money, for, as Blankhampton people assured themselves and one another, the money must be all right, the entire family of the Antrobuses seemed so pleased with the engagement.

And To-To bore herself as young ladies who are on the eve of a brilliant alliance often do ; she became all at once exceedingly delicate and fragile—very Dresden-china-ish, some people said. And she gave herself airs—Oh ! didn’t she ? And did not poor Polly suffer by reason of not having pulled off the matrimonial stakes before her ! I think no one but herself ever quite knew how much.

Perhaps the one who came nearest to knowing was Mrs. Hugh, who did not think To-To fit to be named in the same street with Polly for beauty, and therefore while she was highly elated at her good fortune in getting her second daughter off her hands, she still retained a fixed idea that Polly would rank as a Peeress in the end, and elevate the family for all time ; but she was powerless to avert the little shafts of sisterly spite which the bride-elect was able, aye, and willing too, to let fly at the hapless Polly at all hours of the day.

“Yes ; embroidered muslin would be very sweet for the bridesmaid’s frocks,” was the way in which she goaded Poly into a state of frenzy one day,

“but I think it’s rather *young* for Polly, you know.”

Polly was twenty-three! But the shaft told for all that, and she went off to her own room and cried until she could hardly hold her pretty head up, and her blue eyes were past recognition. And then she rose and comforted herself by vowing that if ever she was Lady Charterhouse, she would never let To-To and her spindle-legged husband cross the threshold of her house. Poor Polly! She had just laved her face and tired her head, when Jane came and told her Lord Charterhouse was in the drawing-room, and that the mistress had sent for her.

So, with another look in the glass and a hope that her eyes did not look red, or rather that they would not appear so red and swollen to him as they did to herself, she went down, looking more like Ophelia than any other character you could have chosen out of the entire plays of Shakespeare. So bad, indeed, did she look, so dejected and crushed, that Mr. Winks felt his conscience in a very unpleasant state, and, after staying more than an hour, drinking three cups of Mrs. Hugh’s best tea, eating a huge wedge of cake, hearing all the most important details about the approaching wedding, told in Mrs. Hugh’s most florid and graphic style, and congratulating the bride-elect in person, he betook himself away without saying a single word of what he had gone on purpose to say.

“Must you go? Well, good-bye, dear Lord Charterhouse,” said Mrs. Hugh in her most familiar

and motherly accents. “I hope you will come in again soon, in spite of our whole house being upset by this wedding; and next week we want you to come and dine with us. Will you?”

“I’m sure I shall be charmed,” stammered Mr. Winks, wondering how he should manage to get clear of Mrs. Hugh and her blandishments; “that is if I’m not already engaged.”

“I will send you a formal invitation this evening,” said Mrs. Hugh, smiling. “And as it is to meet the bridegroom, I hope you will not disappoint us.”

“I shall be charmed, I’m sure; charmed,” said poor little Mr. Winks again; and then, with profuse bows, such as were dear to Mrs. Hugh’s soul, he at last got away.

Mrs. Hugh watched him quite out of sight.

“Of course you know, Polly dear,” she said to her elder daughter, “Herrick is all very well, and To-To being so extravagantly fond of him makes a great difference, but, all the same, Lord Charterhouse is *my* favourite. There is such an air about him, and he is so frank and open and pleasant. I *like* frankness and openness above *all* other qualities in a man,” she wound up.

Meantime, the frank and open Mr. Winks was just passing along the High Street, where he was hailed by Marcus Orford on his way to St. Eve’s.

“Hallo, Winks, where have you been?” he asked.

Mr. Winks looked up the street and down the

street, pulled his moustache and smoothed the back of his head, took his hat off and looked carefully at the lining thereof, set it jauntily upon his fair head, and shook it until it settled at the right angle.

“ Been calling at the Antrobuses’,” he said at length.

“ H’m ! Rather an ordeal, eh ? ” suggested Orford, with a laugh in his eyes.

“ Oh, devilish ! ” returned Lord Charterhouse ruefully..

“ Did you tell them ? ” Orford asked.

“ Tell them ! What ? ”

“ Why,” with an amused look, “ that you’re going to be married.”

“ No, I didn’t.”

“ Why, how was that ? ”

“ Well, I hadn’t a chance,” Mr. Winks answered.

“ Hadn’t a chance ? Why, did you stop long ? ”

“ A pretty fair time.”

“ H’m ! Ah, well, you’ll be getting yourself into trouble, young man, if you don’t look out,” Orford remarked. “ Well I suppose you’re going to the club. You’ll hear the very latest about the wedding there. The last I heard was that the young couple are going to St. Petersburg to see the Royal wedding. Pretty chance they’d have of seeing it when they got there.”

“ Yes—well—ta-ta,” and thus they parted, one for the club, the other for the house of the widow Trafford, in St. Eve’s.

“ I wonder,” ran Marcus Orford’s thoughts, as he

stood on the doorstep waiting for his knock to be answered, "whether Lady Nell or Mrs. Oily-Tongue will get the best of that young gentleman. Fancy the young fool going there and sitting an hour—he must have been an hour from the time I saw him going out of barracks dressed like a tailors' dummy—and never saying a word about Lady Nell. 'Pon my word, if I see the old lady I'll not utter a single syllable about it. By Jove, if Charterhouse is such a fool about the business, the old girl deserves a chance," and then Mrs. Trafford's neat maid opened the door and Marcus Orford walked into the house and straightway forgot all about the latest bit of gossip.

As the maid told him Miss Madge was in the drawing-room, he went into that room, where he found his aunt-by-marriage-elect surrounded by a select group of friends, all busy retailing scandal to the crispest of muffins and the most fragrant of tea.

"My dear boy," cried Mrs. Trafford, beaming at him with her sweetest smile, "you are just in time, for the fresh tea and newly-toasted muffins are but just brought up. Pray have you heard anything up at the barracks about the very latest *on dit*?"

"I've heard that the second Miss Antrobus is going to marry the Czar of Russia," replied Orford promptly, as he took the little widow's hand.

"Oh, yes, I heard all about *that* the day before yesterday," said the little woman, with an accent of faint scorn, which was very lowering to the

Antrobus family in general and to the impending marriage in particular. "Of course, poor things, they are quite carried away by their good fortune. My dear boy, Mrs. Antrobus came here yesterday," she went on in a hurried whisper, "and caught me at home, more was the pity; and I do assaw you I had the whole story from beginning to end. I was perfectly exhausted, as Madge will tell you; in fact, the girls all came in together, and I was so faint and worn out that Madge insisted—insisted on giving me a little wee cognac and soda."

"Ah, I suppose you were bored to death. That old lady is an infliction, particularly when she gets on to family subjects. I wonder you don't deny yourself to her, Mrs. Traff?"—yes, they were such good friends that he had began to call her Mrs. Traff, being probably almost the only man in the wide world who would or could have taken such a liberty without being severely rebuked for it.—"'Pon my word you're too good-natured to live. Why on earth should you be bothered with all that old woman's oily glorification of herself?"

"Well, truth to tell," whispered or rather murmured Mrs. Trafford, in her most confidential tones, "I did tell Cox not to admit her; but the fact was that Mrs. Fairlie was just going out as Mrs. Antrobus reached the door.

"'Oh! how do you do, Mrs. Antrobus?' she said sweetly. 'How I wish you had come half-an-hour earlier. I've been having a long chat with Mrs. Trafford, and I'm obliged to hurry away now.

Good-bye.' And, as Cox said: 'What could I do, but let the lady know you were at home, ma'am?'"

"Ah! I see—I see. Then what is *the* news?" Orford asked, with some curiosity.

Mrs. Trafford drew him a step nearer to the tea-table, and further away from the company.

"They say that Captain Graham has run away with Mrs. Hildersley."

"Run away with Mrs. Hildersley?" Orford repeated. "Oh! that can't be true, for he was lunching at our mess to-day."

"Really?"

"Yes, quite true, and some of our fellows went back with him; his wife's got an afternoon-tea on to-day."

Mrs. Trafford looked a shade incredulous.

"Well, for poor Mrs. Hildersley's sake, I sincerely hope it is so; but it was given to me as a positive fact, and, as all the world knows, there's never smoke without fire."

"Well, Mrs. Hildersley certainly has seemed utterly gone on Graham lately," said Orford. "I can't tell what she sees in him myself. I'm sure he's not half as good-looking as her husband is. I call Hildersley a very decent-looking fellow."

"Oh! a good many ladies in Blankhampton seem to be equally smitten with Captain Graham's charms," said Mrs. Trafford, with a contemptuous air. "I call him a little, ill-looking fellow, with his one-sided eye-brows and his cadaverous face; perhaps

it is that sweeping-brush of a moustache they admire so much. By-the-bye, what regiment was he in before he became on the Staff?"

"The 9th Hussars."

"You don't say so? I should never have taken him for a cavalry officer," in great disdain.

"Oh! that's because his knee lets him down."

"What about his knee?" suspiciously.

"Nothing particular—only that he has a game knee, which every now and again gives him a wrench in walking and prevents him from being so smart as he once was," Orford answered. "By-the-bye, Mrs. Traff', do you know where Madge is?"

"Oh! my dear boy, be patient," Mrs. Trafford exclaimed, with her most playful and kittenish air. "Madge will come as soon as ever she escapes out of the hands of torture. She is having frocks fitted on her upstairs."

"Why couldn't the dressmaker come in the morning?" asked Orford impatiently.

"She was to have done so, but *good* dressmakers have to be taken when they can be had, and, if Madge is to look presentable when your father and mother come to see her, she must not quarrel with her bread and butter now. See?"

"Oh! yes, I see," with a dismal groan. "Mrs. Traff', don't you think it would be a good idea to have a model made, so as to do for all time?"

"An excellent idea, if one could afford it," the little lady answered.

"I'll have one made for Madge at once. May I order one for you at the same time?" he asked.

"Oh! thanks, many. Well, I must go and talk to some one else a little while. Possess your soul in patience until Madge comes."

So Marcus Orford set himself to do Mrs. Traff's bidding, and possess his soul in patience until his divinity should appear; and as he waited, idling with his tea and muffins, he overheard a great deal of what two ladies nearest to him were saying.

"My dear," one was saying in a low tone to the other, "I can't tell how Mrs. Trafford can have got hold of the story, nor who can have told her; and if you were not my own sister, I wouldn't tell you for the world—even now I tell you as the profoundest secret. *It's quite true!* I got an inkling from something she let out the other day, and I went to Captain Graham and taxed him with it straight—straight! And, my dear, he was as cool as ice, and as brazen as Satan about it. Cut me short altogether, and asked me to be good enough to mind my own business and not interfere with his. Well, I went home baffled. I didn't know what to do, and with Charlie away too. However, I determined to stop it if I could, for I'm fond of her; so I never set foot outside my house, except when I saw her come out of hers and go toward the town. I just haunted her house when she was in it. And at last, after ten days' of waiting and watching, she asked me to dine and spend the evening quietly with her. I noticed that she seemed nervous and

restless, and she kept the children up at dessert a long time; then she took me to see them in their little beds. She'd never done that before, and altogether I felt sure that *the night* had come. So, at last, I went home, but kept my things on and watched until I saw a cab creep quietly up to the corner. And then I went out, and asked the man if he wasn't waiting for a lady from the end house; and he said: 'Yes, for Mrs. Hildersley,' and then I knew I was on the right track. So I waited in the shadow until she came out, and then, when she got into the cab, I jumped in after her.

"'Emily,' I said, 'you're going to do this night what you'll rue to your dying day. Come back.'

"Well, she said she wouldn't, that she loved Graham better than her life—

"'Better than your husband, Emily?' said I, and she just laughed in my face—

"'A thousand times better than my *husband*, Georgie,' she answered.

"'Better than your soul?' I asked.

"'Oh, my soul—how do I know I have a soul?' she said lightly, or what she tried to make sound so.

"'But you know you have *children*,' I said, and I held her arm fast as we rattled over the cobbles, so as to make sure she should hear me. 'Five little, helpless, motherless children, whom you are going to brand with disgrace this miserable night. Five little, motherless girls, who will blush at the sound of your name, whom you have seen for the last

time—Do you realise it, my poor girl?—*for the last time!*’

“And then, poor thing, she began to cry, and cowered down into my arms, for she couldn’t bear the mention of her children, and so I got her at last to promise she would go home and forget this dreadful night for ever. Oh! it’s true enough, my dear, true as gospel, and that despicable villain, Graham, is flourishing at his wife’s tea this afternoon, and trying to do devoted husband, and all that! But mind, Constance, that I tell you this as a profound secret. I shall not breathe it to another soul.”



CHAPTER III.

STEADFAST.

“Nothing is so oppressive as a secret: it is difficult for ladies to keep one long, and I know even in this matter a good number of men who are women.”

—LA FONTAINE.

HOWEVER the story had got afloat, the reported elopement of Mrs. Hildersley with Captain Graham was the chief topic of conversation with everybody who came into Mrs. Trafford’s drawing-room that afternoon, and everybody was equally positive that they had had the information as a fact, and that there was no doubt whatever of its truth. Each one had had it from an exceedingly intimate friend of one or the other of the families most immediately concerned in the matter. Each one had noticed something very particular in the manner or bearing of the two delinquents during the past few days, and each one had been quite sure for several weeks that things could not go on much longer at the rate at which they were then progressing without a dreadful scandal coming to light.

“Well, now, I have been wondering which one of them he meant to go off with,” remarked one jovial little lady, who seemed to be thoroughly

“ up ” in the latest details. “ I’m sure his attentions to that Mrs. George Greene have been beyond belief, but then, poor, vulgar, over-dressed, mindless thing, I’ve always pitied her for having that horrid old husband, with his yellow, weazened face, like those dried-up bodies we saw when we were staying at Munich last year, and who takes no interest in anything but his money-bags. I dare say to her, Captain Graham seems quite an Adonis, although a woman with any *pride* wouldn’t condescend to know a man whose wife lives in the same street, and who would as soon think of visiting her charwoman as her—but then, of course, who could expect a woman like Mrs. George Greene to have any pride ? Where was she to get it ? ”

And then Mrs. Trafford came to the rescue.

“ *I* think scandal terrible,” she said in her most suave tones, “ and really, my dears, you are all talking scandal dreadfully. Will you believe me if I tell you that you are all quite wrong, that Captain Graham has no more eloped with Mrs. Hildersley or anyone else, any more than he has eloped with me ? My dears, Captain Orford tells me he lunched at his mess to-day, and several of the officers have gone back with him to Mrs. Graham’s afternoon party.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then a volley of questions was directed at Orford. “ Was it really true ? ” Had he himself *seen* Captain Graham, or did he only happen to know that he had been invited to lunch at the mess of the Black Horse ?

Oh, he really had seen him! Well, of course that was very conclusive evidence that he could not have run away with Mrs. Hildersley. Captain Orford was *quite* sure that it was *to-day* Captain Graham had lunched at the Black Horse mess. Oh, he was! Well, of course, that left nothing to be said on the subject; but—but, by-the-bye, did anyone happen to have seen Mrs. Hildersley that morning? For the life of him, Orford could not resist stealing a glance at the two blooming sister matrons on the sofa. For a moment there was dead silence, then Mrs. Farquhar (the “Georgie” who had played such a bold part the previous night) looked up, catching the full gaze of Marcus Orford’s eyes as she did so; she blushed scarlet, but made haste to give evidence for her friend.

“I happen to have seen Mrs. Hildersley twice to-day, once before breakfast, and again as I was coming out this afternoon. She has not been seen in the town because her second little girl is ill with bronchitis!”

She was so nervous and flurried at having to speak up aloud, that Mrs. Trafford and Orford both made haste to her rescue.

“That surely leaves no more to be said on the subject,” said Orford.

“My dear Marcus, we will close the discussion,” said Mrs. Trafford with dignity. “Here is Madge! My dear girl, as the greatest favour to me, take no notice of Captain Orford for a moment, but go to the piano and sing us a song.” And then she added

in a rapid undertone, “Don’t say a word, dear ; it’s to fill an awkward gap.”

Bidden likewise by Orford’s smile and nod, Madge went straight to the piano and seated herself at it. It was a handsome piano—a grand—and she sat so as to face the audience. And she sang? Well, this :

“ In the gloaming, oh ! my darling,
When the lights are dim and low,
And the quiet shadows falling,
Softly come and softly go.
When the winds are sobbing faintly,
With a gentle unknown woe,
Will you think of me, and love me,
As you did once long ago.

“ In the gloaming, oh ! my darling,
Think not bitterly of me ;
Though I passed away in silence,
Left you lonely, set you free,
For my heart was crushed with longing,
What had been could never be ;
It was best to leave you thus, dear,
Best for you and best for me.

She had a rich and full voice, which had been admirably trained, and as the plaintive words stole through the room, Marcus Orford could not for the life of him resist glancing at Mrs. Farquhar again ; she blushed more vividly than before as their eyes met, blushed so deeply, in fact, that anyone might have fancied that she was the unfortunate woman whom they had been discussing and condemning so unmercifully.

“Captain Orford,” she whispered presently to him, “did you hear anything of what I was saying just now?”

“Yes, I did,” Orford answered. “But you may make your mind easy about it, Mrs. Farquhar, I will never breathe it to a single soul.”

“Oh! thank you,” she said, with a sigh of relief, “I ought not to have been talking about it, for I am most anxious that not a word of the truth shall creep out, and I was bound to tell *somebody*,” she added with a burdened air, “for I never was able to keep a secret all to myself in my life, and my husband is away, you know.”

“I have forgotten all about it already,” said Orford, solemnly.

“That is a blessing,” she declared—and then Orford went back to Madge Trafford’s side, and Mrs. Farquhar went away, if the truth be told, not because she *wanted* to go, but for fear she should be betrayed into letting anyone but the two who had heard it, share her secret.

She had but just gone when another of the Black Horse—Sir Anthony Staunton—made his appearance.

“I say, Orford,” he said, taking the opportunity of whispering to his comrade when Madge Trafford was carried off to the piano, “I say, there’s the devil’s own fuss going on about Mrs. Hildersley.”

“What about her?”

“Oh! they say she went off with Graham last night, and that Mrs. Farquhar brought her back.”

“Really! What had Mrs. Farquhar got to do with it?”

“That’s more than I can say. Anyway they came home together from some place or other in the small hours of the morning.”

“Ah!—can’t say anything about it, I’m sure,” returned Orford, with profound indifference and stolidity. “Have you been at the Grahams’?”

“Yes.”

“Many people there?”

“Good many—yes.”

“Mrs. Graham look much the same as usual?”

“Ye-es. Well, no, I can’t say she did. The fact was, he was so attentive to her that she looked as if she was hardly sure whether she was herself or not.”

“Ah!” remarked Orford again. “By the way, Miss Trafford and I have been talking about a trip up the river—sort of water-picnic, you know. Would you like to join it?”

“Yes; I should awfully—be charmed, in fact. What a good idea. I suppose we couldn’t cajole Urquhart into going?”

“Hardly—not under the circumstances.”

“No; but we might get old Coles. I should like to see old Coles attached to——” with a look at the lady of the house.

Orford laughed.

“Yes, he would be in a mortal funk the whole of the time. However, that’s neither here nor

GARRISON GOSSIP.

there. I am to include you in the thing if it's got up?"

"Oh! yes, certainly," said Staunton. And then Mrs. Trafford's eldest flower, Julia, began to sing, so they were, perforce, obliged to be silent.



CHAPTER IV.

A BOHEMIAN PAST.

“True love can no more be diminished by showers of evil-hap,
than flowers marred by timely rain.”

—SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

THE post-corporal had just brought in the afternoon post-bag, and most of the officers of the Black Horse who were in barracks were gathered in or near the ante-room, discussing the letters and the news.

Orford was sitting on one end of the big, double, leather-covered sofa, with several letters in his hand. At that moment he was reading one from Mrs. Trafford.

“MY DEAR MARCUS,”—it ran—“I want you to ask a gentleman to your picnic for me; he is a Mr. Vyvyan. If I may bring him with us to-morrow, will do.

“Yours affectionately,
“MARION TRAFFORD.”

“Any of you fellows know who Mr. Vyvyan is?”
Orford said aloud.

“Vyvyan? Well, there are the Vyvyans of St. Michael’s, and the Vyvyans of Stormount—and—”

“Oh, yes, yes—but I mean here in Blank-hampton.”

“Don’t know at all. Never met anyone of the name here,” said the first who had answered his question.

“Oh! you mean that chap that’s staying at the ‘Golden Swan,’ ” exclaimed another.

“Yes; that’s the man, I believe.”

“Man about forty,” his informant went on.

“Ah! Yes?”

“Drives a Stanhope-phæton and a chestnut mare?”

“Well?”

“Rather good-looking and big, but scarcely quite the right stamp on him. Such a good imitation of a sovereign that it puzzles you, though you *feel* it ain’t a good one—that’s about the man.”

“Ah!—otherwise a cad?”

“Scarcely! What about him?”

“Oh, nothing—only that Mrs. Traff’ wants to take him up the river with us to-morrow. I suppose he must have had a letter of introduction to her or someone she knows. I wanted to know what sort of a chap he was, that’s all.”

“I saw him at the Parish on Sunday,” put in Dayrell. “Reminded me awfully of a very pleasant Yankee chap I met out in Norway. By Jove! he was about the most amusing chap I ever came across. Had been all through the Civil War, was badly wounded, too, more than once. Told me he was once in hospital with a Southerner, a prisoner,

who was very sick and had got lower even than his bottom dollar ; in fact, he had got to such a low ebb financially, poor devil, that he was going without tobacco because he had no money to buy any. So the other one lent him twenty pounds, never thinking to hear any more of it. For a good many weeks they were the best of friends and then they parted, my friend never dreaming he would hear of the Southerner again. However, about a year after he got a huge box of oranges from Florida, and a note from the Southerner returning the twenty pounds, and saying he was ' very glad to be out of debt to a d—d Yankee ! ' ”

“ By Jove ! ” muttered three or four voices.

“ Yes ; good story. I daresay it wasn’t true, but that, of course, is neither here nor there ; anyway, this American was something like Vyvyan.”

The result of this was that, when Orford went to St. Eve’s to see his sweetheart, he told Mrs. Trafford that they—that is, the givers of the pic-nic —would be delighted to see Mr. Vyvyan or any friend she might care to bring.

“ My dear boy,” said Mrs. Trafford—and, by-the-bye, I may as well remark here that, having grown attached to her niece’s *fiancé* in so great a degree that sometimes Orford wondered what she could find in him to make so much fuss about, she never missed a chance of calling him her dear boy—“ My dear boy, I should not dream of inundating your party with my friends, nor should I have asked for Mr. Vyvyan had I not been begged to show him

some kindness and make the town—which, as *you* know, Marcus, is insufferably dull to most people, especially if they are strangers—a little pleasant to him.”

“I’m sure you made it very pleasant to me,” said Orford, looking at Madge and thinking, without the least feeling of satire, how much trouble Mrs. Trafford had given herself in order that he might have a good time. “But, Mrs. Traff, where did you first meet with this Vyvyan, and who is he ?”

“We met him at the Archdeacon’s.”

“Oh, really ; where did he pick him up ?”

“I don’t think he picked him up at all,” said Mrs. Trafford, with a certain accession of dignity in her tones—“he is a great friend of theirs.”

“Oh, really ? I didn’t mean anything slighting to him, Mrs. Traff’, only it’s rather a marked name, you know, and generally one hears at once what part of the world they come from, or what family they belong to Vyvans, I mean.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m sure,” said Mrs. Trafford, in her most important tones, “that *no*-body can be *more* alive than I am to the advisability of admitting no one into your house until you know everything there is to know about them, I am shaw”—and in her desire to give a due amount of impressiveness to her words, Mrs. Trafford’s accent began to get distinctly pronounced. “I am shaw nobody can be more particular about her acquaintances than myself. When you and dear Madge are married, I think it

A BOHEMIAN PAST.

will be far the best for us to leave Blankhamp-ton and live in Town ; it is quite impossible to avoid having a very mixed acquaintance here, or in any such place, in fact. All these doctors and lawyers and professional people are all very well in their way, but—er—one doesn't want to *visit* them, you know."

" My father was a professional man, Auntie," Madge put in gently.

Her aunt had been particularly kind to her of late, tender and motherly to a degree ; but, for all that, Madge was obliged to make her protest.

" Your father was an *Art-ist*," said her aunt, in a tone of dignity mingled with reproof. " If he had lived he might, and probably would, have been President of the Academy."

Madge shook her beautiful head sadly.

" Never, Auntie."

" He might have been," persisted Mrs. Trafford ; " at any rate he was a most *distinguished* artist."

" He gave drawing lessons," said Madge.

" Oh ! I've no doubt he had ups and downs, my dear," returned Mrs. Trafford, who could have killed her niece at that moment for being what she called in her thoughts ' so ridiculously plain-spoken,' so unnecessarily explicit about the past, which, after all, was of the bygones now and could never be changed or altered ; which was all over and done with, and which was a past distinctly to be regretted because Francis Trafford had been a handsome genius, an artist by nature, with brains enough not

only to have reached the very top of the tree, but also to have kept there if he had made the effort to do so, but who yet had married a sweet, pretty, lady-like girl, who had been a governess in a school where he taught—a woman who had many lovable qualities, and a shy steadfast nature which had made her worship him to the last day of her life, and work her fingers to the bone to keep little Madge as a Trafford child should be kept, but who was yet emphatically *not* the wife to help such a husband as Francis Trafford on in society or the world, and had so, in Mrs. Traff's opinion, ruined his life.

In a certain way, Mrs. Traff was right enough. She had no sympathy with the Bohemian of the art-world, who was too great a genius to work. In fact, Mrs. Trafford did not care much about genius at all—the genius which persists in painting a picture which is too peculiar or too startling to sell. She would much have preferred the talent patient and careful to watch the taste of the buying classes, as a speculator watches the tapes at the Stock Exchange, which would only paint what would sell. In truth --and let me only breathe it in a whisper—I believe Mrs. Trafford would infinitely have preferred the talent which produces chubby children gathering fruit, more chubby children disporting themselves in basin and bath, beautiful young ladies exclaiming in delight at the contents of a box just arrived from their milliners, or beautiful but less youthful ladies trying in vain to cover up a bald patch on the top of

their heads, which we see adorning the covers and advertisement sheets of our periodical literature now-a-days, to the genius which would paint a picture, which, though it might rouse the world of a hundred years hence to enthusiasm as a masterpiece, would not sell, and die in a garret of hunger. So she had but small sympathy with Francis Trafford, who had distinctly mistaken his day and generation.

She went on speaking without giving Madge time to reply.

“But we need not rake up bygones, particularly bygones that were decidedly unpleasant, my dear. I was saying that really Blankhampton is *very* professional, and professional people are not the most pleasant in the world to cultivate—they are so pretentious.”

“Do you think they are?” asked Orford, who liked to get Mrs. Trafford what he called “on,” when he did not happen to be too moved by gratitude to her for having been the means of his meeting Madge.

“Oh! my dear boy,”—and here Mrs. Trafford was obliged to stop and take breath, as if his remark had quite deprived her of it—“My dear boy! Why there’s that Mrs. Antrobus—did you ever meet with such a mass of pretentiousness and assumption in all your life?”

“Well, she is rather a caution,” Orford admitted.

“And there’s that Mrs. Fairlie—horrid woman!”

“Yes; there’s Mrs. Fairlie, but I really don’t think you ought to include her, Mrs. Traff’ Why,

she goes for long country walks with old Coles, and no lady, I'm sure, with any *pretence* about her, would do that. Of course, he's a dear old chap, and, in a certain way, I've got the greatest respect for him, but if I were a lady I should draw the line at long country walks. I should indeed."

"I call that very thing most pretentious," cried Mrs. Trafford. "She is pretending all the time to be a sort of professional beauty, with always a cavalier in attendance upon her—horrid woman! And there's Mrs. Manson."

"Don't know her."

"Ah! it is no loss to you; but they are all alike, these professional people, and I shall be very glad to leave Blankhampton and have done with them altogether."

"Yes, I daresay. I think you're right, Mrs. Traff', and all the people here are pretty much alike. There's the Mauleverers now—they *will* pretend that they're pretty young ladies a man wants to flirt with. I don't know what you think," he ended gravely, "but I call it wicked for a woman of forty to pretend she wants a *chaperon*."

Mrs. Trafford laughed, but did not allow herself to be drawn into a discussion for or against the Mauleverers, who were to her, as Orford very well knew, as Mordecai was to Haman as he sat in the king's gate. Ah! but she was a clever little woman, and knew better than to say a single word derogatory to the Mauleverers, though they positively declined to have her at any price.

As a matter of fact, the Mauleverers were accustomed, among themselves, to speak of her as “that pushing little person at No. 7, who will persist in wanting to know us,” and although Mrs. Trafford had never heard or become aware of the actual words, she yet recognised the tone—and its meaning—but too well—and resented it.

“But, Mrs. Traff,” Orford went on, finding she would not enter upon the Mauleverer question at all, “you haven’t enlightened me yet as to who is Mr. Vyvyan. Don’t you think it would be just as well for me to know before to-morrow? Then I may be able to talk to him about his own people.”

“Oh! to be sure. I’ll tell you all about him. He is one of the Cornish Vyvyan’s, a cousin of the Stormount people. He hadn’t any money of his own, but he married—yes, he’s a widower—a rich Lancashire girl, a manufacturer’s daughter, who brought him a fortune of over a hundred thousand pounds. She died several years ago, leaving him all her property. They had no children. And that is all that I know about him, except that he is an exceedingly pleasant and agreeable man. By-the-bye, Marcus, when are we to expect Lord and Lady Ceespring?”

“Some day next week—Tuesday, I believe, unless anything happens to prevent their coming, such as a fit of the gout or something of that kind.”

“Oh! I hope that won’t happen,” cried Mrs. Trafford and Madge together.

“So do I,” rejoined Orford, “for my—er—father

really is a terror when he's got the gout. I daresay most men are."

"Oh! yes," answered Mrs. Trafford, going to the window. "Oh! here are the girls coming back, with several of your officers with them."

"Then I know you'll excuse us," said Orford promptly. "Madge, my bird, come along."

As Julia and Laura Trafford entered the house and crossed the hall to the stairs, Marcus Orford and Madge slipped across the landing into Mrs. Trafford's little sanctum, commonly called "the boudoir," and he shut the door behind them just as the merry voices of the new-comers reached the conservatory-landing half-way up the stairs.

"I hope Mrs. Traff will be merciful and send us our tea in here," Orford said. "Oh! my darling, what a treat it is to get you to myself for five minutes!"

"Never mind; you will have me all to yourself by-and-bye," said the girl softly. "If you don't get tired of me before then."

"Tired of you?" he echoed with scorn.

"Well, I don't suppose you'll do that; anyway, I hope not," she said smiling. "But, Marcus, supposing your people don't like me?"

"I can't help that. Not that I'm the least afraid of it—my people know a good thing when they see it. My mother will love you because you make me happy, and my father will adore you because you are the loveliest woman in the world."

"But I am not."

“No, perhaps not ; but I think so, and he will think so, which is the same thing, don’t you see ? Besides, what objection could they possibly have to you ?”

“I don’t know ; but—but—oh ! I don’t like to say all that comes into my head—but, we were so poor, so often ‘hard up’—and—and—oh, I can’t tell you exactly what I mean. But, auntie often talks about being Bohemian—Bohemian ! I tell you she doesn’t know what it is, what it means to be Bohemian, any more than she knows what it is to be a Choctaw Indian. To hear her talk, you might think it was something distinguished, pleasant, out of the common ; but in real life, *in London*, it means riding in ‘buses and third-class—it means salt butter and stale bread, because the new cuts away so soon.”

“Don’t,” cried Orford ; “you hurt me, Madge, you hurt me.”

“I must ; I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks past, and couldn’t screw up my courage to do it ; now that I have broken the ice, let me go on. It means one little scrub of a servant—rent over-due—summons for taxes—it means boots down at heel and frocks out at elbow—it means going into mourning for your own hat—Oh ! Marcus, Marcus !”—suddenly dropping upon her knees and flinging her arms about him—“I’ve been so grateful to Auntie for some things, but I’ve hated myself and her for deceiving you. She always says I didn’t care to go out here because I went out so much in

town. I didn't—I didn't, for we were so poor; so poor, like all the other *Bohemian* people. Oh! I can't tell you how miserable I have been. I wanted to tell you all along, though Auntie said I wasn't to breathe it, but I will now. I'm not fit for you, I'm not indeed, Marcus—I've been to the pawn-shop dozens of times!"

It would not be true if I did not admit that at this revelation, Marcus Orford started, aye, and started violently; but he stooped and raised her from the ground as tenderly as—as—well, any other man who was desperately in love with her would have done.

"And pray, what were you doing there?" he demanded; "and why didn't you tell me all this ages since?"

"Because I was afraid," lifting her lovely eyes deprecatingly to his; "and because I knew you would think, and," with a choking sigh, "it's true enough, that I'm not a fit wife for you."

Marcus Orford drew her very near to him, and kissed every doubt away from the lovely flushed face.

"My dear, honest love, whom nothing can ever spoil," he said, "I thank you from the very bottom of my heart for telling me this. All the same, I don't want you to carry your honesty so far as to tell my people all these little details. As they don't either of them want to marry you, they might look at things somewhat differently."

"But if they ever find me out?" she cried.

“Find *you* out!” he laughed. “Who is to tell them but ourselves, and, after all, what is there to tell? It is no disgrace, my love, to be poor, any more than it is any credit to be rich. If you did visit with your avuncular relative—well, let us thank our lucky stars, that, owing to circumstances mind, not through any good effort of my own, I have never had to do the same, and that you will never have to do it again. But I thank you for telling me, my darling—it has made me love you, if possible, a thousand times more than I ever did before.”

“Auntie never knew quite all, she never knew that,” Madge told him, “only that we were awfully poor; and that was only the last year or two, after poor dear Pater could not teach any longer. She’s been awfully good to me, you know, Marcus, oh! so good, and I shall never, never be able to forget it or to repay it.”

“I hope you will never try to forget it, my love,” said Orford, “I never shall. As to repaying it—well,” with a smile, “in a measure that will be an easy matter now. You will have the power to be very kind to Mrs. Traff’ now, if you choose.”

“You may be sure I shall choose,” returned Madge, with a sigh of ineffable contentment and happiness.

Dear, good Madge; to the very lowest depths of her honest and grateful heart she was filled with gladness; she was glad that her sweetheart, who was to her a very king, a very God among men,

knew all about the dark days of the past, and she was utterly thankful to him for his wish that she should try to repay the kindness of the aunt—only her aunt *by marriage*, as she reminded herself—who had come forward at once as soon as she knew of her desperate situation, to stand between her and the hard and cruel world wherein, as Madge had learnt but too surely during the past few years, there is very little room for such workers as she would be, and none at all for those who have neither purse nor scrip.

And it was not, as she invariably reminded both herself and anyone else to whom she told her thoughts, it was not as if Mrs. Trafford was a rich woman, to whom a member more or less to her household made little or no difference. Mrs. Trafford had—and nobody was better aware of it than Madge, nor, for the matter of that, half so well—all her work cut out to make her income stretch out sufficiently to meet at both ends. She had had barely enough for comfort—that is, living in St. Eve's, and doing her three weeks in Town every spring and calling it the “Season;” giving pleasant little afternoons after “the Parish,” and three or four nice little dinners every year, and a big dance every January; dressing her two daughters very daintily, and herself—well, well, the less we say about that the better; and generally taking her place in Blank-hampton “Sassietty” as one of its bright particular stars and leaders. But, when she bade Madge never, as long as she possessed a roof over her

head, to think of or hint at anything so horrible as going out into the world to earn her own living, and had said, freely and kindly: "Come to us—you are a Trafford, one of us—come and share what we have," Madge soon found that her coming had made a decided difference in the household of No. 7.

She had taken from the first the place of a poor relation—had *preferred* the legs of the dickey-birds and the tail ends of the soles—had at once declared she did not care to go into society (which was true enough, for she hated the pretentiousness and humbug of the Blankhampton people, who to her always seemed more like children playing at being grown-up ladies and gentlemen than like men and women of the world), and had from the first given the best fruits of her clever artistic fingers to the creation of pretty and dainty toilettes for her cousins, feeling more than repaid when once or twice Mrs. Trafford had, when in high good-humour, declared that Madge had made her and the girls quite independent of the dressmaker's vagaries. Oh! yes, there was no doubt—nobody in their senses could doubt it—that her aunt had been very generous and good to her; and now she was going to be Mrs. Marcus Orford, with the right to put three magic letters before her name, which would be, she knew, as dear to Mrs. Trafford's soul as her hopes of heaven, and must all her life remind herself of what she was, and what, but for her aunt's intervention, she might have been.

“ Darling,” said Orford, suddenly, “ have you seen this Vyvyan ? ”

“ Oh ! yes.”

“ What sort of fellow is he ? ”

Madge roused herself from a calculation as to the probable cost of her trousseau. “ What sort of man is he ? Oh---not at all the kind of man you would like ; a very florid sort of person.”

“ To look at ? ”

“ Oh ! no,—his looks are the best part of him. No,—I mean he’s florid in manner ; not exactly ill at ease, but always as if he was trying to give you a good impression of himself, though he expected you to have a bad one.”

“ What has he come to Blankhampton to do ? ”

“ Ah ! that is more than I can tell you. He does not hunt, nor, apparently, shoot, though he says he is very fond of fishing. He does not know any people here except the Archdeacon, who met him abroad. I think he has lived abroad a good deal—he seems to know Italy very well.”

“ H’m ! An artist, perhaps ? ”

“ Oh ! I don’t think so. I asked him about some of the galleries in Florence, but he seemed quite at sea about them, though he knew, and intimately too, all about the hotels, and streets, and drives. Ah ! ” with a sigh, “ Father and I were *always* going to beautiful Italy. We used to talk about it, and dream about it for hours, but we never realized it. We never got there.”

“ You shall go, my love,” said Orford tenderly.

“Yes; I shall have everything now,” smiling up at him. “And I have only one regret now—that he did not live to see it. It would have made him so proud and so happy.”

“Perhaps he does see it—who knows?” Orford said.

“Yes; perhaps he does,” said she. “I hope so.”

There was a moment’s silence, then the door opened and Laura Trafford came in.

“Marcus,” she said, “that Mr. Vyvyan is here. Do you mind coming? Mother would like to make you acquainted.”

So Orford rose,—with an inward groan,—and went into the next room. The stranger, Mr. Vyvyan, was standing on the hearthrug, with his back to the fern-filled fireplace, talking to the lady of the house, who was occupied among the teacups.

“Now, where the devil,” said Marcus Orford to himself, as his eyes fell upon him, “have I seen you before?”



CHAPTER V.

▲ VYVYAN OF STORMOUNT.

“Weeds grow sometimes very much like flowers, and you can’t tell the difference between true and false merely by the shape.”

—PAXTON HOOD.

MRS. TRAFFORD looked up with a smile at Orford as he entered the room—she generally did smile at him, but that is neither here nor there.

“Oh! my dear Marcus,” she said, rising from her chair as she spoke, “let me make you and Mr. Vyvyan known to one another. Mr. Vyvyan, this is Captain OR—ford.”

The two men met in distinctly different ways. Marcus Orford stood upright and stiff, looked straight at the other man, and said, “How d’you do?”—but in a tone which did not betray any anxiety to be enlightened as to the state of Mr. Vyvyan’s well-being.

Vyvyan, on the other hand, bowed, really bowed, bowed all over him, so to speak; and again the thought flashed into Orford’s mind:

“Where *have* I seen you before?”

But memory did not come to aid him, and although he felt an uncomfortable sensation of familiarity with this man’s appearance, he yet could not in anyway fix time or place where he had seen

him before. Then, as Vyvyan evidently met him a stranger, he dismissed the idea as unlikely after asking one question.

“Do you know my regiment at all?” he asked abruptly.

“Not at all. I never knew it at all until the last few days,” Vyvyan answered. “I have seen several of your officers since I have been in Blankhampton.”

“Ah! yes, yes, I see,”—and then, after one or two commonplace remarks about the weather and the place generally, he felt he had done his duty to Mrs. Trafford’s visitor, and set himself to hand tea-cups with such vigour that in less than two minutes he was free to carry his own to the sofa where his love sat.

Time had been when Madge was tea-maker, but Mrs. Trafford now would not hear of her doing it any longer.

“No, no, my dear; when you had nothing else to occupy your thoughts, it was all very well, and it relieved me a little; but now it is different, and remember, you will have to pour out your husband’s tea for the rest of your life. No; enjoy your idle time, dear, whilst you have it, and Laura will help me if I am very busy,” she said, soon after the engagement.

“I assure you, Auntie,” protested Madge, “that I am still quite capable of pouring out tea, even though I am engaged to be married.”

“I don’t doubt your capability, my dear,” Mrs.

Trafford returned, “ either on that or any other point, but I wish you to enjoy your engagement as much as possible ; so pray say no more about it.”

Well, Marcus Orford sat beside his beautiful sweetheart, enjoying himself very much indeed, but every now and then he sent the same puzzled, scrutinizing glance in the direction of Mr. Vyvyan that he had favoured him with on their introduction, and the same question kept cropping up in his mind :

“ Now, where the devil have I seen you before ? ”

But instead of becoming more clear to him, the likeness, or rather the familiarity of the face, seemed to fade away somewhat, so that he became more and more puzzled, though he still felt certain that he had seen him somewhere or other before.

“ You don’t like him ? ” murmured Madge at his elbow, as she watched his brave grey eyes again and again seek the stranger’s face.

“ Can’t say I do.”

“ Neither do I,” she said with decision. “ I can’t tell what Auntie sees in him. If I were her I would never have let him inside my house.”

“ Oh, I don’t know that he’s so bad as that,” said Orford indulgently, pitying Vyvyan in his heart for his misfortune in having raised Madge’s dislike. “ He’s not quite the right stamp, perhaps, but he’s rather decent-looking than otherwise.”

“ Good-looking,” echoed Madge. “ Yes, if you call a wax dummy out of a barber’s shop good-

looking perhaps he is. But, for my part, I can't bear that pink and white and black type."

"No? What type do you like?" Orford asked, and then they went off into a conversation on the merits of black eyes or blue, which is not essential to this story, therefore I will not repeat it.

"But as for him," Madge ended, turning her large and lovely eyes towards Mr. Vyvyan in order to indicate that she was speaking of him, "he will be a deal better-looking when his hair is grey. I shouldn't wonder if he isn't rather a distinguished-looking *old man*."

Grey hair! Grey hair! Why,—all the feeling of familiarity with this man came back with tenfold force! Of course, he had seen the face before,—and then a sudden recollection of a Vyvyan of Stormount came to him, and the mystery was solved. He remembered it all so well, how, when he was a little lad of ten years old or so, one of the Vyvvans of Stormount had come to pay his father a visit, a handsome, fresh-complexioned, vigorous, man with a profusion of grey hair. Yes, of course, that was the face he had been thinking of.

"Were you a son of John Vyvyan of Stormount?" he asked, crossing the room and putting the question to him point-blank.

"No, I was Gregory's son," answered Vyvyan politely.

"Oh, you were Gregory's son!" in surprise. "But I always thought he went out to Australia and died?"

“ I was his son, nevertheless,” the other said composedly.

“ But the Stormount people know nothing about that, do they ? ”

“ Very likely not. My father has been badly treated by his relatives, who did not approve of his marriage to my mother. I have never claimed any acquaintance with the Vyvans of Stormount, because my father never forgave them, and never wished me to do so.”

“ But you claim the family ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; because that *is* my family, and I have the same right to be proud of belonging to it that they have.”

“ Yes, I see. Well, I must say you have surprised me,” Orford said, “ because I had not the least idea that Gregory Vyvyan ever got wrong with his people at all. By-the-bye, you never met John Vyvyan ? ”

“ No, never.”

“ Ah ! you are very like him, you might be his son.”

“ I am his brother’s son,” said Vyvyan, with dignity.

“ Yes, yes, exactly,” murmured Orford, and then he went back to Madge once more. He was intensely interested now in Mrs. Trafford’s new friend, and he watched him closely from the moment that he had declared himself to be the son of Gregory Vyvyan of Stormount, who had gone out to Australia and died.

“Mother must have been rather a howler,” he said to himself, “and she’s set the stamp of it on him, without his being exactly a howler either.”

Orford could not help wondering what the circumstances of this man’s life, his early life, that is, had been. Not such as it was now, that he could swear; for there was a certain formality about his speech, a care in pronouncing his words, a tendency to double his aspirates which told Orford plainly enough that he did not speak now as he had been accustomed to speak as a child. There was a good deal of that peculiar swagger about it, such as used to be commonly given and accepted as the particular jargon of the cavalry officer, although it was about as true to life as the idea which used to be, I believe, equally prevalent in France, that all English women have splay feet and long horse-teeth, and the effect of the whole was distinctly odd,—the swagger and the formality and the elaboration of the aspirates, all taken together, being quite sufficient to account for the verdict Dayrell had given of him, “such a good imitation of a sovereign that it puzzles you, though you *feel* it ain’t a good one.”

In effect it was something like this—he was speaking to Mrs. Trafford then :

“Oh!—er—ah—ya-as. I—er—know Giberaltah very well indeed—ah! Ya-as, an interesting little place—ah! And—er—we hhad several trips into the interior—ah—though I nev-ah went really into the—ah—hheart of the country.”

“’Pon my soul,” muttered Orford to his sweet

GARRISON GOSSIP.

heart, “it’s a funny thing to hear a Vyvyan of Stormount talking about ‘Giberalta.’”

“I don’t believe he’s a Vyvyan of Stormount at all,” asserted Madge. “Does he look like a Vyvyan of Stormount?”

“Well, yes, he does, he’s as like them as two peas,” Orford answered, “but the mother must have been a howler—must have been.”

“Oh! yes, that I can quite believe,” said Madge, who had taken a thorough dislike to the man, and was not to be argued out of it, Vyvyan of Stormount, or no Vyvyan of Stormount.

“Hallo, what’s the joke?” Orford asked, seeing that Laura Trafford and Staunton were watching, with evident amusement, something that was going on in the street below.

Laura looked across at them, and beckoned them to come, and when they got there they saw what Laura called a procession on the opposite side of the way, consisting of To-To Antrobus and her young man, Herrick Brentham, a yard or two behind them Polly, looking prettier and more foolish than ever, yet very proud because Lord Charterhouse was in attendance upon her, and, bringing up the rear, Mrs. Hugh and Baby, her youngest hope and but a little stick in the shortest of petticoats, with legs like a hen.

Staunton and Orford positively chuckled with delight to see Charterhouse thus under convoy; as for Mrs. Hugh, she was a sight to see—she seemed to be treading air, as she waddled along, and her

smile, larger, fuller, more beaming and more triumphant than perhaps anybody in the memory of man had ever seen it before, shed the full measure of its effulgence and glory upon the very stones of the street as she passed!

“I wonder how Lady Nell would like that?” remarked Staunton, as the last of the procession turned the corner, and passed out of sight. “I should think she——” but there, a sharp kick from Orford froze the words upon his lips and he stopped short.

“I say,” he asked, as they went back to barracks together, “why did you shin me so terrifically, when I mentioned Lady Nell?”

Orford laughed.

“Well, if Mr. Winks is such a young ass, as to be going constantly to the Antrobuses’, without ever mentioning Lady Nell or his engagement to her at all, I think it’s only fair that the old lady has a chance, without any outsider telling her anything about Lady Nell.”

“What old lady?”

“Mrs. Antrobus, of course.”

“But why should not the Traffords——?”

“Know anything about it?” ended Orford. “Why, my dear chap, because Mrs. Traff don’t care any too much about Mrs. Antrobus,—it ain’t in reason she should—and she would revel in letting her know it. No; I have never mentioned it, because I didn’t want to spread the news. I wanted the old lady to have a fair chance.”

And it happened at that very moment that Laura Trafford strolled into her cousin's room, where Madge was just making herself presentable for dinner.

"Madge," she said abruptly, "you know when we were standing in the window watching Mr. Winks and the Antrobuses go by?"

"Yes."

"Why did Marcus give Sir Anthony such a frightful kick?"

"Did he?" in surprise.

"Rather; my shin positively ached out of sympathy for him. It was something about a Lady Nell, that Marcus didn't want us to know."

"I wonder what?"

"I wish you would try and find out."

"Yes, I will," returned Madge. "But who is Lady Nell?"

"Ah! that's what I want to know. I wonder if Mr. Winks is engaged all this time? Somehow, I never cared much about him."

"Oh! he's a mere baby!" cried Madge, with fine scorn. "A very nice boy and all that, but a mere baby; give me a *man*."

"Like Marcus Orford," cried Laura, with a gay laugh.

"Or Sir Anthony Staunton," retorted her cousin teasingly.

And just at that moment too Mrs. Hugh was saying to Mr. Winks:

"Oh! *must* you go, Lord Charterhouse? Don't;

do stay and have high tea with us and go to the Winter Gardens. The Royal Engineer band plays there to-night; and it's the *best* string-band in England, you know."

"I—I should like to, awfully, many thanks, Mrs. Antrobus," answered Mr. Winks, with a downward glance at his clothes.

"We are not going to dress, it is *only* high tea," answered Mrs. Hugh, with her airiest tone and laugh.

So it was settled, and Mr. Winks slipped so many inches deeper into the mire, which would end in landing him,—*where?*



CHAPTER VI.

ANTE-ROOM GOSSIP.

“In the adversity of our friends we always find something which is not wholly displeasing to us.”

—ROCHEMOUNCAULD.

“NOT a word to Mr. Winks, mind,” said Orford to Sir Anthony Staunton, as they parted at the door of his quarters.

“Oh! not a word, of course,” Staunton answered.

The precaution was, however, unnecessary so far as that evening was concerned, for instead of being found among those who assembled for the mess dinner, Lord Charterhouse was seated comfortably between his hostess and the fair Polly, enjoying himself thoroughly if the exact truth be told, and highly edified in watching—as was Polly—to see how many times the turtle doves,—as the whole family of the Antrobuses usually called To-To and Herrick Brentham—would contrive during the course of the meal to touch hands under cover of the table-cloth.

He admired little To-To very much, admired her pretty eyes, and her bright complexion, and her pretty, bronze gold hair, and he wondered what she could see in “such a sulky, ill-conditioned beast,” as he called Herrick Brentham--who seemed to

think he had got engaged to the girl in order to scowl at every man, no matter what might be his age or calling, who came within a dozen yards of her. Mr. Winks, somehow, did not much care about Mr. Herrick Brentham, a feeling which was shared by everybody in Blankhampton, who happened to cross that scowling gentleman's path.

“The brute's so insufferably impudent!” he exclaimed to Orford the next day. “Now, last night, I was sitting on the other side of the table as far away from him as I could very well get, and this brute, who had only been introduced to me half-an-hour before, bawled out:

“‘Aw! Charterhouse,’ said he, ‘can I give you some of this chicken?’”

“‘Thank you, Mr. Brentham,’ said I—and I said to myself: ‘Charterhouse! H'm! that's like your d—d cheek.’”

“Did he take the hint?” Orford asked.

“Well, no, confound him! I can't say he did,” Mr. Winks replied; “but then, how could you expect an under-bred brute like that to see anything in the shape of manners. Can't tell myself what that pretty little girl sees in him. He's as ugly as sin, and as mean as the grave, if her engagement rings are any guide on the subject, and, by Jove! the fellow's legs are after the same pattern one sees in the penny illustrated papers.”

“I suppose there's money?”

“Money! Oh, a little, doubtless; but I know if I was a pretty girl I should want a devil of a lot of

money to gild a fellow of his class. Her people say it's such a pity he's so jealous. Jealous! By Jove! in his case it's only another word for an all-round bad-temper. By-the-bye, have you heard the latest about Graham?"

"No; what about him?"

"Well, it seems he's been going on any pace with Mrs. Farquhar, and his attentions to Mrs. Hildersley and that other fat, yellow-haired woman were nothing but a blind. Mrs. Farquhar is the one, and they're saying that Mrs. Graham was only in the nick of time to stop them from going off together."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, I heard it last night," meaning that he had heard it from Mrs. Hugh.

"Ah! If I were you, Winks, I shouldn't repeat it," observed Orford coolly. "I happen to know—not from hearsay, but really I know—that there isn't any truth in it. Besides, is it likely Mrs. Farquhar would leave a handsome husband like hers, to go off with a grubby little rat like Graham?"

"Well, it isn't altogether; but, you know, there is never any accounting for a woman's taste. All the women here seem more or less gone on Graham, at least, they're always abusing him, and that, I take it, is about the best sign one could have that it is so."

"Likely enough; but, all the same, Mrs. Farquhar will never throw Farquhar over for Graham.

'Pon my soul, I don't believe she'd touch him with a pair of tongs. She's a good little woman, that."

"Yes, I daresay. Well, it's to be hoped it won't get round to Farquhar's ears, that's all."

"Yes; but in any case Farquhar would hardly be such a fool as to believe it; a man could never pay himself such a poor compliment as to be uneasy or jealous on account of a Graham. Well, are you coming on the river with us to-day?"

"What's your programme?"

"Simple enough. Two tubs—Mrs. Traff' and her daughters, Miss Trafford and Miss D'Arcy, myself and Staunton, Bowers and that fellow Vyvyan. I must have another man for Miss D'Arcy."

"Oh! I don't know that I care very much about Miss D'Arcy," returned Lord Charterhouse coolly. "I daresay she was very pretty ten years ago, but you know, Orford, that ain't now, and somehow I don't seem exactly to care about it. Can't you ask Brookes instead?"

"Yes, I can; but I know Brookes won't go."

"Why not?"

"Because he don't like Miss D'Arcy—won't have her at any price. No, I'd better see if Cunliffe won't come."

"Your very man; best fellow in the world for a river party. By-the-bye, where are you going and what are you going to do?"

"We're going to row up as far as Applegarth,

where there's an idyllic inn, all honeysuckle and roses and such-like."

"Rather late in the season for those," laughed Lord Charterhouse, who had been brought up a good deal more in the country than Orford had been.

"Well, but they've got cream and fresh eggs, and all things of that kind, at any time. Anyway, we row up to Applegarth, get tea at the 'Queen of the Roses'—yes, that's the name of mine inn—go to see a wonderful old ruin near the village, and then to see a wonderful wishing well, and after we've all consulted an old personage who is going to tell us our fortunes, we shall quietly slip down stream in the gloaming, and wind up with a supper at Mrs. Traff's."

"And very delightful it will be, my dear chap, particularly for you; but, I don't think I care about it this time. Cunliffe's your very man, and I wish him and Miss D'Arcy joy of one another."

Thus foiled in his attempt to secure a man to complete the party, Orford went off to the ante-room in search of Cunliffe, who was young and flippant, being of that gay and jovial disposition which would cheerfully accept an invitation to dine with Old Nick himself, did nothing else present itself in the way of a change.

There were a good many officers in and about the ante-room, but Cunliffe was not one of them. Those who were there, however, were so busy picking to pieces a man of the Artillery, whom most of them knew, and whom Orford knew perhaps most intim-

ately of all, having been at the same crammer's before one went to Sandhurst and the other to Woolwich, that he really felt obliged to stay and hear the conversation out, instead of going straight away in search of Cunliffe.

“They say he's going into Parliament. Yes, it's really true. Oh, the beggar's clever enough in all conscience, in fact, a deuced sight too clever,” said Dayrell. “I remember being over one night in their camp, when we were out in Suakim; for a wonder the fellows weren't too wrapped up in their own importance or their scientific studies or what not to go in for a little innocent recreation in the shape of larking, and I must say for a set of well-behaved, stiff and starved prigs like Artillery generally are, they'd got a very tidy programme together; a ve—ry—ti—dy—pro—gramme—in—deed. A good many of 'em had been fired by what had been going on in our camp, and, being all cleverish sort of chaps, they were anxious to improve on it. They'd got a superb trap for the Colonel, which, as I told them, was dangerous and disrespectful. And there were all sorts of odds and ends for the delectation of the youngsters, but the chief attraction of the evening was the drawing of De la Motte. De la Motte himself had been rather more disagreeable than usual—”

“Then he must have been charming,” broke in one of the audience.

“Disagreeable brute, enough to aggravate anyone into drawing him,” cried another.

“Did you sit next him, George?” asked a third.

“No; I didn’t. I sat just opposite, so that I had the full benefit of the various and delightful play of expressions which passed over his hawk-like countenance. The others tried to toast him into exceeding his usual quantity of liquor, but Motty was too wide-awake for that.”

“Ah! he’s just one of those wide-awake brutes that’s never caught napping for a single moment,” exclaimed a man who evidently bore the absent Motty no good-will. “I believe he sleeps with one eye open, like a weazel.”

“Like enough—his eyes are just like a weazel’s. However, this night, although they *all* wanted to drink wine with him, Motty wasn’t to be caught, for after the third message had been taken to him, Motty just filled his glass to the brim, and said:

“‘Gentlemen, I pledge you all!’ and then he turned to his next neighbour, and said with a disagreeable laugh: ‘Bless me! how popular I have become all at once. I wonder what good fortune I have to thank for that?’

“Well, it happened to be an awfully hot night, and the flies and other creepy-crawlies were uncommonly bad—they were terrific in fact. Sleep without a mosquito-net, you couldn’t. The idea was to do Motty out of his sleep for that night. He was begged to take a hand at whist, and, to the general surprise, took it at once. What was more, he all at once began to make himself agreeable.”

“H’m! I know Motty in that stage,” put in Orford. “He shows his teeth and the whites of his eyes, and draws up his breath with a sort of hiss. Yes, I know him then. *If* possible, he is more unpleasant then than at any other time.”

“Yes—however, I didn’t stay to see him. I went off with the others to demolish his tent. First they took the mosquito-net, hammock and his pyjamas, made them into a bundle, and sent them off to be deposited under the shelter of the Colonel’s tent-canvas; then they took the pole up and let the tent down, and just carried the pole as far away as they very well could, and then they went back to the mess-tent and entertained him (among others) with an account of shaking young Trevor in a blanket, and made a display of Trevor in a very ruffled condition, both of mind and body.

“Apparently, Motty was utterly taken in and went off to his tent after a—for him—lavishly cordial exchange of good-nights and other jollity. We sat down to cards so as to be ready, when he came back to swear at us, with an appearance of festive innocence. We played a few games of Van-John, and then we took to Nap—but there was no sign of Motty. In fact, he never came back at all. We bore it for a good bit, and then when flesh and blood could stand it no longer, we sallied out and cautiously went to reconnoitre.

“It was a still, hot, sultry night; there was not a sound but our own footsteps as we sneaked along over the sandy ground. It was pitch dark overhead.

We crept along cautiously—cautiously—feeling our way like blind men, hand in hand. And at last we got to the place, expecting to hear Motty ramping and swearing after his own peculiarly boisterous and fluent fashion ; but there was not a sound, all was still as death on the desert, and there lay the tent like a played-out balloon—just as we had left it.

“ One of the fellows had a little bull’s eye lantern, and turned it on for us to examine the place—but there was no Motty there, not so much as a sign of him. After that, there was a search for him, but he was not to be found, not even though we searched in every officer’s tent except the Colonel’s. We did take a peep into his, but he caught a glimpse of the bull’s eye and swore at us with such earnestness that we concluded that if Motty had taken shelter there, he’d better be left to enjoy it.

“ Well, finally, we all went to roost, thoroughly sold, feeling that Motty, the brute, had got the best of us this time, somehow ; and then, in the morning, it turned out that my fine fellow had got an inkling of what was on, had quietly sent his servant to sleep in another tent, and had rigged up his spare hammock and mosquito net in his servant’s tent ; so the fellow had actually gone straight to bed after he bade us ‘ good-night ’ in the mess tent, and had had an excellent night, with the pleasure of getting up in the morning to jeer at us.”

“ How was it we never heard of this before ? ” somebody asked.

“ I’ll tell you. I stayed over in the Artillery

camp that night, and in the morning old Bellamy, the Colonel, you know, happened to find Motty's belongings hidden under the flap of his tent. It was quite a chance his doing so; but he kicked up such a devil of a shine at *his* tent being made a convenience of for any such d—d ungentlemanly conduct, that I concluded along with the others that we had better hold our tongues about it, and that the fewer people knew anything about it the better chance there would be of escaping a court-martial. Old Bellamy swore he would court-martial the whole lot who had taken part in it, and I knew—as I wasn't a bold Artilleryman, but only a humble Dragoon, and a visitor in the camp—I should get into a devil of a mess for taking liberties with a full-blown swell like him; so I just kept quiet about it. But, by George! didn't Motty take it out of us just! I should like to have rammed his teeth down his jeering and sneering throat."

"I fancy he would sneer pretty well, and on the whole his temptation was strong," said Orford, laughing. "But do you know, I saw him the other day in the Park, and you fellows all know what a spick and span chap he is, when he's got up to kill? Well, he was got up immensely that morning—black clothes, white cravat, white gaiters, and new gloves, all as smart as smart could be—when up walked Dirty Van, and thrust his hand under his arm. 'Well, old boy,' said he, 'how are you? How do, Orford?' said he to me. Motty's face was

a study, I can tell you, and he walked in that unwilling way that a child lets himself be shoved along by a nurse when he doesn't want to go and daren't say no.

“‘ What's the news ? ’ bawled Van.

“‘ Why, you've heard the last ? ’ snaps Motty.

“‘ No, I haven't,’ says Van.

“‘ Well, what's the driest spot in Great Britain ? You know ? ’

“‘ No, I don't. Give it up,’ cries Van.

“‘ Dirty Van's bath,’ says Motty. ‘ Heard it at the club yesterday.’

“ And,” ended Orford, “ poor old D. V. left in a hurry.”

“ I should think so,” laughed Brookes. “ Even D. V. can see some things.”

“ And that was plain enough for a blind man to see clearly,” returned Orford. “ Well, I must be off. I want Cunliffe. Does anyone happen to know where Cunliffe is ? ”

“ He went out of this half-an-hour ago,” answered Brookes. “ I don't know, but I think he's going to afternoon tea at the Palace.”

“ Oh, no he isn't, he's coming up the river with me,” said Orford, coolly.

And so it was. When he reached Cunliffe's room, he found that cheery young gentleman enjoying a pipe, while watching his servant lay out his clothes for the afternoon.

“ Hullo, Orford,” he said, as he caught sight of his visitor. “ What's the news ? ”

“I want you to come up the river with us to day.”

“Awfully sorry, I can’t, I’m going to have tea with ME at the Palace.”

“Quite impossible—you’re coming up the river with me,” responded Orford coolly. “If ME wants you to go over there, he should ask you to dinner in a decent, respectable way. It’s preposterous to expect us to go over there in the afternoon, except for tennis or a garden-party.”

“It is tennis,” said Cunliffe.

“Yes, I know. It always is tennis—and a nice condition the lawn will be in after the rain we’ve had the last fortnight. Oh! don’t you go, my child—you’ll have Miss Victoria inviting you to walk round the forcing houses, and unless you want to be saddled by the shadow of ‘ME’ for the rest of your life, you’d better keep clear of the Palace, except a lot of us are going. Anyway, you’re coming up the river with us to-day, so you can’t possibly go any where else.” And then he explained the scheme for the afternoon’s entertainment.

“Miss D’Arcy,” repeated Cunliffe, who like most other fellows in the regiment, gave in under pressure from Orford. “Who is she? I never met her anywhere that I know of.”

“She’s the Canon’s daughter.”

“Oh! really—pretty?”

“Yes, awfully pretty; quite one of the prettiest girls about Blankhampton.”

“Ah! Then I think I’ll come,” as deliberately as if he had decided the question for himself.

“That’s right. By-the-bye, we may as well go down together. The trap will be round in half-an-hour—you’ll be ready?”

“Oh! yes.”

And sure enough, half-an-hour later, the young gentleman made his appearance at the front door of the officers’ quarters, where Orford and a very tall dog-cart were awaiting him. And three minutes later came Staunton with a rush, who drew down his lips when he saw the lad, and said feelingly:

“Poor devil! Are you paying him out, Orford?”

“Hush—sh!” said Orford.

CHAPTER VII.

A SLIP.

“What women would do if they could not cry, nobody knows
What poor, defenceless creatures they would be.”

—DOUGLAS JERROLD.

ON the whole, the water-party passed off very well, and was a decided success. If anybody had a right to be dissatisfied or to grumble, it was young Cunliffe, who had been distinctly deluded into going by the representation of Miss D'Arcy as a pretty and attractive young lady; but Cunliffe did not grumble at all; on the contrary, he enjoyed himself fairly well, and admitted that the afternoon's entertainment was an improvement on the stiff and stately hospitality of Blankhampton Palace.

For the every-day life of “ME,” otherwise John, by Divine Providence Lord Bishop of the Diocese, partook always, more or less of the nature of a pageant, something like a court ceremonial in miniature, very satisfying no doubt to the lordly mind, which had in the days of his boyhood looked up to his parish priest, as far as now he looked down upon the same dignitary, but a little tiresome to gay young subalterns, who had been born to the luxuries of plush and silken hose, to serving giants

gliding about ancestral halls, and to the comforts of shiny carriages and high-stepping horses, even if they had never ridden in such an *ark* as the episcopal omnibus, which daily blocked up the narrow streets of the old city, causing more accidents and bad language than some of my readers might think credible. As Mr. Winks said one day to Orford :

“Somehow the Palace always makes me feel as if I’d got to the Heavenly Jerusalem before my time, which is uncomfortable.”

“Really. Ah! never feel that way myself,” returned Orford, “there’s much too worldly a savour about the whole business to suggest anything so spiritual to my mind. No, it’s to be hoped, when the Palace people get to the Heavenly Jerusalem, that Mrs. Jones will be able to forget her profile, and John Blankhampton to remember that he’s no better off than his father, and perhaps not quite so well. Now, I’ll tell you what it makes me think always—of the times when I used to have to go and pay duty visits at my godmother’s, old Lady Screwell. Lord, what a time I used to get! However, she’s dead and gone now, poor old soul, so I needn’t bear malice for past sufferings. But, Gad, what a life that old woman led! She belonged to the Plymouth Brethren—used to make me go to chapel with her too, and I had to shake hands with all the brethren, greasy old chaps I’d never been introduced to! However, that don’t matter now, and the poor old soul left me every penny she had—saddled, by-the-bye, with a desire that, if my

principles would let me, I'd become a P. B. myself."

"And did you?" enquired Mr. Winks with interest.

"Not quite! No, I took an affidavit or whatever you call it—made a declaration, yes, that's better—that my principles would not allow me, and I gave five hundred to the chapel fund, and never heard any more of 'em. Oh! I daresay they were very decent sort of people in their way—but their way wasn't my way, and I can't say I found 'em interesting as acquaintances."

Well, to return to the water party; it was, as I have just said, a success, a decided success, and perhaps the one who really enjoyed it more than anyone else was Sir Anthony Staunton, who remained the whole time a fixture at Laura Trafford's side.

Naturally enough Laura was in the most brilliant spirits and looked as pretty a little plump edition of her piquant little mother (yes, it was becoming the fashion in Blankhampton, since Orford had expressed his intention of marrying into the Trafford family, to call Mrs. Trafford "piquant;" it was a mere detail, a merely trifling difference in the choice of words, for it conveyed very much the same impression as the word "pert," which had been in general use up to the time of Madge Trafford's engagement) as you could wish to see in a day's march, and on his part, Staunton got spoonier and spoonier, and more inclined to think Orford a downright clever fellow for having made

up his mind to marry into the Trafford family, than he had ever done in all his life for any reason.

And Mrs. Trafford, merry little soul that she was, enjoyed herself like a child, looked after everybody, saw everything done for the comfort of all, and flirted with her new friend, Mr. Vyvyan—well, as Madge said with a laugh, to Orford—scandalously.

But Orford scarcely responded to the laugh, in fact he was too busily occupied in watching the proceedings of Mrs. Trafford's new friend, Mr. Vyvyan, with the result of being more firmly convinced than ever that if he was the son of Gregory Vyvyan of Stormount, his mother must of necessity have been what he called “an out-and-out howler.”

It would have been difficult for Marcus Orford to define exactly what was amiss with the man or his manners; he was big and good-looking, had a good straight nose and a good square resolute chin, he had black, level eye-brows above full black, or I should say dark brown, eyes, and his complexion was brilliantly florid. Altogether he was a handsome man, and an uncommon-looking one into the bargain; but though he was as like the Vyvyans of Stormount as one of a dish of peas is like to the others, he lacked the air of distinction which above all things distinguished the members of that family from the common herd, and he had one or two tricks of manner—not vulgarisms—for which Orford would dearly like to have shaken him.

One of them was a way of standing with his arms hanging down to their full length, with the hands crossed one over the other with the backs of both hands uppermost; and another was a certain air of attention, intended to be very deferential, to the ladies who addressed him, an attitude in which the chin was held in, while he looked out from under his eye-brows in a furtive way, which made Orford positively long to kick him.

“Why the devil can’t the fellow look out of his eyes like an honest man who’s got nothing to be ashamed of?” he said to himself irritably.

The contrast between the two men was singularly marked, in truth, it was as great as could be between two men of the same race, and height, and weight, which they were, as nearly as possible. For Orford’s head rose straight and bold above his broad shoulders, the chin was generally thrust a little outward, and his bonny, bold grey eyes looked straight and true at anybody or thing that he wanted to see. Yes, he was a marked contrast to Mr. Vivian Vyvyan, and he gave his verdict on that gentleman freely but briefly to anyone who mentioned him—“Goodish-looking chap and uncommonly like the Vyvya*n*s; all the same, his mother must have been an out-and-out *howler*.”

After the day of the water-party, however, he did not trouble himself about Mrs. Trafford’s new friend or take any notice of him, except to give him a nod, and an “Er, how d’do?” on meeting, or an “Er, good-day,” on parting; and if Mr. Vyvyan had any

idea of knowing the Black Horse through Captain the Honourable Marcus Orford, why he perforce gave the idea up, for Orford never noticed him any further than as I have just explained.

Naturally they did not see very much of one another, although Vyvyan made tremendous running with Mrs. Trafford, and gossiping tongues in Blankhampton were soon at work concerning them; for Orford was taken up body and soul, one might say, with his sweetheart Madge, and when he was not dancing attendance on her in the various shops in the High Street—which, by-the-bye, was not very often, since she was able to do most of her shopping in the mornings—they passed their time in a secluded corner of the Winter Garden or in the obscurity of Mrs. Trafford's boudoir, where a little tea-tray set for two used to go when the larger one, at which Laura now presided, was taken into the drawing-room for the rest of the family.

And it was wonderful how much envy that little tea-tray caused, among the very few people who knew of its existence.

“Orford always was a lucky beggar,” Sir Anthony Staunton grumbled one day to Laura, “he always gets spoilt wherever he goes. Now, why shouldn’t I be indulged with a special tea-tray all to myself?”

“I’ll send your tea down to the library if you like,” returned Laura, laughing, “only you’d find it rather tiresome, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh! by myself, yes,” he answered.

"Well, we cannot indulge you with Madge, you know, unless Marcus——"

"He wouldn't. Besides, with all due respect to Miss Madge, whom I admire beyond everything, I shouldn't thank him if he would. But why shouldn't you and I have the library and a separate tea-tray as our own special privilege?"

She turned scarlet from chin to brow.

"Well, because——" she began, stammering.

"Yes, I know; but why shouldn't we?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh! I don't know. I—I—Oh! what did you say, Mr. Vyvyan? Another cup of tea for Mrs. Fairlie? Oh, certainly! She takes sugar and cream, does she not?"

Yes, Mrs. Fairlie did take sugar and cream—"and the devil take her," as Staunton said, when he heard Vyvyan's formal smooth voice at Laura's elbow. And then, when Mrs. Fairlie had got her tea, sugar and cream and all, Vyvyan came back for another cup for Mrs. Trafford—who, to do her justice, would have thirsted for a week rather than have interrupted Staunton at such an important moment—then to fetch one for Miss Adair, then to have his own cup replenished, and in his wake came the inveterate old gossip, Colonel Coles, who stayed at the table to drink it, and contrived to put an end to Sir Anthony's opportunity altogether for that day.

And after that it seemed as if everybody in the room was in league to prevent the implied question

being answered. Never for a single moment was Laura left alone; and at last, when the little horse-shoe clock,—the emblem of “good luck” by-the-bye—on the mantel-shelf, struck the hour of seven, and not a soul had made the smallest attempt to say good-bye, Staunton got up in a fury, and bade Mrs. Trafford farewell.

“Oh! are you—*going?*” faltered Laura, who was being pestered by unwelcome attentions and compliments from old Coles.

“Yes—good-bye,” savagely, and without looking at her. “There’s not a chance—at least, that is—good-bye,” and the next moment, in spite of her entreating looks—which he did not see—he was gone.

How shall I describe the girl’s feelings? She felt as if she had missed Paradise, as if the world might come to an end as soon as it would, as if she could kill all these people who moved smilingly to-and-fro, treading the happiness of her whole life into its grave, with their careless, unheeding feet.

It was by a great and brave effort that she kept her composure until the last to take leave had gone. It happened to be Colonel Coles, who fired off one of his antique and florid compliments upon her as he took her hand in farewell, and him she watched to the door with the last smile that she could summon to her poor, trembling lips.

And then, when he was gone, when the closing of

the door in the hall below told them that he was really out of the house, she gave way altogether, and fell down beside her mother, and hid her face against that little woman's gown, and cried, and cried, and cried as if her very heart would break.

“My dear—my dear child!” cried little Mrs. Trafford, in the utmost consternation and dismay—for this was a new and distressing departure from Laura's usual way—“What is the matter? You are ill, surely. Tell me, dear, what is it?”

But poor Laura was not able to stop her convulsive sobs in order to give an explanation to her sudden outburst of grief; on the contrary, she clutched her mother's gown tighter and tighter and sobbed on with such hysterical passion, that her cousin, attracted by the sound, ran in from the adjoining room, followed by Orford who stood aghast at the unusual sight and felt like a brute, though he didn't know why, and Mrs. Trafford, finding that neither she nor Madge, who had dropped upon her knees beside her cousin as soon as she saw something was grievously wrong with mind or body, could elicit a word from Laura, just took her in her arms, and, holding her head against her bosom, let her grief exhaust itself on that comfortable haven, taking no steps to soothe her save by an occasional “There, there—there, there—”

Marcus Orford helplessly watching them—Laura sobbing, Madge gently smoothing one of her hands, and Mrs. Trafford swaying to and fro with the indescribable air of comfort the actions of a tender-

hearted woman are capable of showing—said to himself that Urquhart had proved himself no such fool when he wanted to marry her.

“By Jove! she’s a right good sort, and no mistake about it,” his thoughts ran, “and as bonny a little woman as a disappointed chap of Urquhart’s age has any need to go for”—and then, Laura’s sobs having suddenly come to an end, he said aloud :

“Mrs. Traff, give her a brandy and soda—there’s nothing on earth like it.”

“The very thing, my dear boy,” she exclaimed, “you always suggest a sensible course. Do you mind going into the dining-room and ringing for Cox?”

But not even the brandy and soda loosened Laura’s tongue. She sat up on the floor beside her mother when Orford appeared at her elbow and prepared to add the soda to the brandy, and dried her eyes and said with a piteous catch of her breath, that she’d been ‘an awful donkey to make such an exhibition’—but that really she couldn’t help it, and—and—she thought the heat of the room had been too much for her, and that the people had upset her or—or—something. Anyway, she didn’t feel very well ;—and then she drank the draught which Orford had prepared for her, and dried her eyes again, after which she said she felt better, and tried to smile by way of proving her words ; but it was a poor, miserable attempt at a smile, and Orford saw that it was so.

“Oh, you’re upset Laura, that’s what it is,” he said, in his jovial, off-hand tones. “And if old Coles

has been here all the afternoon, I'm not surprised at it. You'll be better when you've had dinner, and, by-the-by, Mrs. Traff', that reminds me, I must be off to mine."

"Oh! you'll dine here?" she cried.

"Not to-night, Mrs. Traff', a thousand thanks all the same," he answered, "I must dine at mess to-night."

Mrs. Trafford followed him down into the hall.

"Why won't you stay?" she asked. "Madge will be so disappointed."

"Oh, no, she won't; she gave me a look which meant 'Go away.' Laura's upset and seedy, and will eat her dinner all the better for being without me. No, I won't stay to-night, thanks. I'll come down in the morning and see how she is. Good-bye."

He bent—aye, and he had to bend—down and kissed her as her son might have done, and the next moment was off, going at a sharp pace along St. Eve's, his toes well turned out and his head held high in air; and more than one society-girl, on her way home to dinner, looked at him with admiring eyes, and thought what a shame it was that one of "the Trafford lot" should have secured such a splendid fellow, and have the prospect of being Lady Ceespring into the bargain—not that they had anything against Madge personally, but she was one of "the Trafford lot"—people who had just come to Blankhampton, and were nobody knew who or what.

As for Mrs. Trafford, she watched him out of sight

and murmured “ Dear boy ” as he turned the corner, and then she went back to her drawing-room to try and find out what had been the cause of this unusual outburst of grief. With a little trouble she got at the bottom of the mystery, and Laura, with more sobs and tears, poor girl, told them—and surely never, since the foundation of the world itself, did three more sympathetic pairs of ears listen to a tale of woe—how cruel Fate had been to her that miserable day !

“ He will never ask me again,” she sobbed, casting herself into Madge’s sympathetic arms. “ I know he thought I was—was—trying to avoid answering.”

“ Oh ! no—no—he could not, my dear,” said Mrs. Trafford, in her most soothing voice, though in truth she could have knocked her pert little head, with all its wonderful arrangement of coils and plaits and its dainty little make-believe cap, against the wall for her stupidity in not having left Laura free for that afternoon. “ Don’t worry about it,” she went on, “ it will be all right. We will give him an opportunity of speaking out, without any fear of an interruption. It will be all right ; but don’t distress yourself, darling, that won’t do any good and will only make you look ill and wretched.”

“ He won’t come again,” sobbed Laura.

“ He must come to the wedding, for he has promised to be best man,” put in Madge. For a moment Laura was pacified by this solid and substantial bit of comfort ; the next she said with a

dejected sigh, "But I shall not be near him, Julie will be first bridesmaid."

"Oh! I'll give up that honour if it will secure me such a brother-in-law," cried Julia, with her little cracked laugh.

"You cannot; it would look too pointed. All Blankhampton would be talking about it, and saying we had arranged Madge's wedding, so as to catch Sir Anthony; and," she added, with a mournful air, "they would never know or believe he had once gone so near to asking me, would they?"

"What matters what Blankhampton thinks of any of us?" cried Madge, with hearty contempt. "They bear us no goodwill now, and I'm sure I get such black looks that sometimes I feel quite nervous when I'm out alone."

"And if that was all, I'll retire from the office of bridesmaid altogether," cried Julia. "Madge wouldn't be offended under the circumstances, would you, Madge?"

"Certainly not—far from it," answered Madge, with alacrity. "But there—long before the wedding it will be all right and straight between you."

Meantime, Marcus Orford had, thanks to his long legs, got quickly back to barracks. He had not much time to spare, but he made enough to go into Staunton's quarters—where, by-the-bye, he noticed a photograph of Laura Trafford set up against one of the ornaments on the mantel-shelf.

“I say, old man, why didn’t you wait for me?” he asked.

“ Didn’t know you were coming back,” returned Staunton, with anything but a polite tone.

“ No more I was; but something’s up at No. 7. We went into the drawing-room, Madge and I, and found Laura crying, as if her heart would break.”

“ Crying ?” repeated Staunton, in a curiously strained voice.

“ Yes, rather. Did you notice anything amiss ?”

For a moment or so, Staunton looked things unutterable. “ It’s that dam fool, old Coles,” he burst out savagely—but in a softer voice “ and she was crying, was she ?” and then he added, “ Confound him !”



CHAPTER VIII.

A DISH OF SCANDAL.

“I find great numbers of moderately good people, who think it fine to talk scandal. They regard it as a sort of evidence of their own goodness.”

—F. W. FABER.

AT the River House that evening, all was light and gaiety, for the Antrobuses were giving a dinner-party.

The River House was very well adapted for that sort of thing, being a large square house, with fine lofty rooms, and an entrance hall and vestibule which was quite palatial. On this evening the whole place was looking its best. Ferns and flowers were set here and there, Chinese lanterns shed their soft glow among the creepers and jessamine which wreathed the veranda, and garden chairs were set out beneath them, so that the men could enjoy the fragrant and soothing after-dinner cigarette and chat with the ladies at the same time.

In the drawing-room, which was lighted only by candles, there were flowers in profusion, and in the dining-room they were put about wherever space could be found for them, between the sparkling silver and glass. In short, the effect of the whole

establishment was one to make you think of a celebrated entertainment which took place at the beginning of this century.

“There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium’s capital had gathered then
Her beauty and her chivalry ; and bright
The lamps shone o’er fair women and brave men.”

It was all thus. There was the sound of revelry, the softly shining lamps, the undeniably fair women, and, let us try to believe, the brave men. Perhaps, as Mr. Winks was the only soldier present, it would be as well to leave chivalry out of the comparison, for, alas ! Mr. Winks was drifting, drifting on, over a dangerous sea, full of sunken rocks and breakers, which would probably end in bringing him to shipwreck.

It was unlike him to be torn two ways at once ; it was utterly foreign to his nature to be thus playing fast and loose with love, engaged to one girl (and such a girl) and yet be hanging about after another girl (and she such a girl too) with whom he had not the very smallest intention of ever dividin the honours of his title. Moral fear he had none—if he chose to go in a certain direction and believe himself right in going that way, not all the combined chaff and bullying of his brother officers could coax or drive him into going so much as a hair’s breadth out of his own line ; and yet, here he was, engaged to Lady Nell Temple whom he had loved all his life,

yet drifting along beside Polly Antrobus, not so much fascinated by the girl, as fallen a victim to the machinations of her astute mother,—for in spite of all bygone failures, Mrs. Hugh was an astute woman, aye, and a game old bird into the bargain.

The soup was just off, ox-tail of the best, and the fish, salmon (if you want to know exactly what fish) was just on, when Mrs. Hugh, in her oiliest tones, began to discuss the gossip of the garrison with Mr. Winks, who sat beside her.

“Lord Charterhouse,” she began, “do you think it’s true about Colonel Coles?”

“I don’t know. What about him, Mrs. Antrobus?” he answered. “I don’t think I’ve heard anything particular about him.”

“Well, I’m told,” said she, with an important air of imparting accurate information, “and I really believe there’s something in it, that he is going to be married.”

“You don’t say so? Poor old chap! It must be on the better-late-than-never principle,” observed Mr. Winks indulgently. “And who is the lady?”

“Who do you think?” with her little airy laugh.

“Oh! I can’t say. There’s so much ‘They say, What say they? Let ‘em say,’ in Blankhampton, you know. But it’s not Mrs. Trafford, I’ll go bail for that—she wouldn’t look at him—be a good thing for him if she would.”

“Oh! he’s done better than Mrs. Traf-FORD,” cried Mrs. Hugh smiling, and unconsciously elong-

ating and magnifying little Mrs. Traff's name into a regular mouthful.

“Really? Oh! do put me out of my misery. Who is it?”

“Mrs. Forster.”

As a matter of fact, little Mr. Winks very nearly jumped out of his chair with astonishment.

“You don't mean it!” he exclaimed.

Mrs. Hugh nodded.

“Yes, I do. It came to me to-day as an absolute fact—a fact. *I* think,” she added with a wise, reflective air, “that he has done very well for himself. It isn't *every*body who would care to marry Colonel Coles.”

“That's true, Mrs. Antrobus,” returned Mr. Winks, “but I should think it isn't *any*-body who would like to marry Mrs. Forster. I know I'd sooner die first!” he ended emphatically.

Mrs. Hugh beamed upon him with indulgent pride, and Mr. Winks asked a question:

“Where did you hear it?”

“Mrs. Hildersley was here this afternoon. She told me.”

“Oh, really! Did she tell you anything about the Graham affair?” he enquired in a distinctly sarcastic tone.

Mrs. Hugh did not notice it, and replied simply enough:

“Yes; she did indeed. She told me *all* about it.”

Mr. Winks put his head a shade closer to Mrs.

Hugh's smart lace cap, and listened with a very eager air of attention.

“Yes?” he said, in a tone which begged her to go on.

Mrs. Hugh went on.

“I must say I like Mrs. Hildersley *very* much,” she declared, as if her verdict sealed the fate of Mrs. Hildersley from that time forth and for ever more. “I *al-ways* did like her, and though I confess for some little time past I have not sought her out at all, in fact, I have rather given her the cold shoulder, yet, when she came and had a quiet talk to me, I quite absolved her in my own mind from the least blame in the miserable bit of gossip which has run from one end of Blankhampton to the other.”

“About Graham?” murmured Mr. Winks, helping himself to salt.

“About Captain Graham—yes. Of course, as you know, Lord Charterhouse, in this wicked world we have to be very careful how much or how little we believe. I am not an ill-natured woman always ready and willing to think the worst of everybody, and when I heard this awful report about Mrs. Hildersley, I said not a word—I simply kept out of her way until I had real confirmation for or against it. I thought it was the kindest and most neighbourly and most charitable thing to do.”

“Awfully good of you,” put in Mr. Winks, in a murmur.

It did not occur to him—as it would have done to

Orford's keener and quicker mind—that, in truth, Mrs. Hugh had, by her mysterious allusions, her nods, her little oily, yet airy laugh, her dark hints and her self-important air of possessing all knowledge, helped the story on its way quite as effectually as even old Coles, the gossip *par excellence* of the whole garrison, had done.

Mrs. Hugh, however, disclaimed the extreme goodness of her actions.

“Well, of course, I like to be kind and charitable as far as I can, but, at the same time, I must admit that I was not altogether disinterested in keeping aloof. I have my daughters to think of,” with a certain air of dignity, such as would have tickled Orford’s sense of the ridiculous greatly but which rather impressed Mr. Winks than otherwise. “And—er—I was very glad when Mrs. Hildersley herself set my mind at rest about the matter.”

“She did that?”

“Oh! perfectly—perfectly. She was so open and simple, and frank about it; in fact, she told me *all* about it.”

“But if it’s not true about her, what could there be to tell?” asked Mr. Winks.

“A great deal,” said Mrs. Hugh, with an ominously quiet and even tone; then added, with her most portentous nod, “It’s all true about Mrs. Farquhar, every word of it. In fact, Mrs. Hildersley told me the story we have all heard, just word for word, only that her position and Mrs. Farquhar’s were reversed.”

“ You mean that she went and fetched Mrs. Farquhar back ? ”

“ Yes ; just so.”

“ And that Mrs. Farquhar was on the point of running away with Graham ? ”

“ Exactly.”

“ And she told you so positively ? ”

“ Oh ! yes, positively.”

Mr. Winks pondered for a moment.

“ She really put it into plain words ? She didn’t merely let you gather or infer that it was so ? ” he persisted.

“ My dear Lord Charterhouse, she told me in plain English,” returned Mrs. Hugh without hesitation.

“ H—m ! ” muttered Mr. Winks, and pondered for another space. “ I say, Mrs. Antrobus, don’t it seem to you very mean to peach about such a matter, if it’s really true ? ”

“ There can be nothing mean in telling the truth, Lord Charterhouse,” said Mrs. Hugh with dignity. “ Besides, as she said herself, poor thing—and she almost burst into tears as she told me—besides, she was obliged to tell the truth in self-defence, for Mrs. Farquhar has done her best to spread the story far and wide. It is really strange,” Mrs. Hugh continued reflectively, “ that if you do a person a good turn, they seem to become your enemies immediately, and the greater the service you render the more bitter and lasting is the enmity you have in return for it—” and she sighed, as if her whole

life had been spent in doing good unto others for the wages of thankless ingratitude !

“ But do you know, Mrs. Farquhar stood up for her right and left—I know that for certain. One day at Mrs. Trafford’s, she shut everybody up point-blank, and Orford backed her up.”

“ I have not the least doubt of that,” returned Mrs. Hugh, who had not thought very much of Orford, since he had chosen to marry into another family than hers.

“ I don’t think I altogether trust Mrs. Hildersley,” Mr. Winks declared. “ And if I were you, Mrs. Antrobus, I should keep clear of her a little longer. Seems to me such a mean thing to go prating about a thing of that kind; sort of thing you’d like to kick a man for, don’t you know ? ”

Mrs. Hugh was just about to reply ; but her attention was distracted, and the conversation brought to an abrupt close by the scowling frown which sat up aloft on Mr. Herrick Brentham’s noble brow, and which Mrs. Hugh perceived at that moment for the first time.

The cause thereof was not far to seek, for To-To, who naturally sat beside her betrothed, was talking in a somewhat interested manner to the gentleman upon her other hand, a circumstance not unusual with a bride-elect in her father’s house, but evidently singularly disconcerting to the festive Herrick.

For the rest of the meal Mrs. Hugh sat on thorns, and how fervently she longed for the blissful and

convenient moment when, with fan and gloves and lace-bordered broidered handkerchief, she could signal to the ladies to take flight like a covey of startled birds on the wing, would need a more graphic pen than mine to tell. But, alas, a plump pheasant had but that moment been set before her husband, so that she was compelled with smiles and fortitude to endure to the bitter end, still four courses away. Poor Mrs. Hugh! She had had most of the trouble in preparing and arranging for this party, and behold the bride-elect must needs go and spoil it all for her, must needs laugh and coquet—*scandalously*, as Mrs. Hugh said afterwards—with this man, who had always admired her, while Herrick grew blacker and blacker, sulkier and sulkier, and neglecting his dinner, gave all his attention to the wine, a course which was foolish, and which, had he been brought up in an atmosphere of good liquor, he would have known better than to take as a haven of refuge, for not being very good wine, a headache was bound to follow in due course.

If Mrs. Hugh had but known it, it would, during those four uncomfortable courses, have been of the greatest comfort to her.

“Oh, dear, dear,” she said to herself, with an inward groan, “Why will To-To be so foolish? I believe she wants to tempt Herrick into a display of jealousy.”

She said as much to Polly after they reached the drawing-room and To-To had vanished up the

stairs in the direction of her own room. Polly was not particularly sympathetic.

“I shouldn’t worry about it, if I were you, Mamma,” she said quietly. “It is better To-To should know exactly what he is, while she has time to change her mind.”

“Change her mind!” exclaimed Mrs. Hugh in a whisper of horror. “And what about her trousseau?”

“Oh! I don’t suppose she will change it—she likes him well enough; it’s a pity he’s so terribly jealous.”

“A pity!” echoed her mother. “It is simply deplorable—de—plorable, Polly! Ah, that is the worst of these self-made people, they never know how to control their feelings,”—and then she added, with a sigh—“I never thought a child of mine would marry into a *new* family. For what is *money* in comparison with birth and all that birth brings?”

Polly, after her way, looked very wise, but she had nothing to say on the subject, so Mrs. Hugh went back to her guests with the comforting assurance that Polly would never trouble her in that fashion.

CHAPTER IX.

DIFFIDENCE.

“ The Wheel of Fortune turns incessantly round, and who can say within himself ‘ I shall to-day be uppermost ’ ? ”

—CONFUCIUS.

WHEN Laura Trafford had been in the depths of distress at the unwelcome circumstances which had occurred to prevent her coming to an understanding with Sir Anthony Staunton, her mother had uttered words of prophecy best calculated to soothe her, and also thoroughly in accordance with her motherly wishes and desires.

“ Never mind, dear,” she had said when Laura sobbed out that he would never ask her again, “ we will give him an opportunity of speaking out without any fear of interruption.”

Ah, yes; it had all seemed so easy to accomplish then. She had looked forward to arranging one or two pleasant little entertainments, at one or other of which Sir Anthony would be able to speak his mind and gather from Laura that her heart was his.

But, alas! this is but a contrary and troublous world, which even a little woman, who loves her own way—aye, and will have it by hook or by crook—cannot always arrange to her liking, or bend at her will and pleasure. She planned and contrived, and

arranged to make the opportunities she had so confidently promised to Laura ; she almost proposed in Sir Anthony's stead—and she quite accepted in Laura's—only that Staunton was too dense or too troubled to perceive the drift of her conversation, while Laura was too proud to take advantage of her good offices. For, somehow or other, a wall of constraint and coldness had suddenly grown up between these two, and they met rather as if they had had a quarrel than otherwise ; met with the most frigid politeness and ceremonious demeanour, which, as time went on, froze instead of melting under the sunshine of Mrs. Trafford's brightness and gaiety.

The first time they met was one afternoon when Staunton called at the pretty house in St. Eve's. He found Mrs. Trafford alone in her rose-lighted drawing-room, her most becoming coiffure perched carelessly on the top of her head, her prettiest gown on, and her little hands well-occupied by some knitting-work of crimson silk unmistakably intended for a masculine foot, and that not a particularly small one.

“Oh, how do you do ?” she said, in her most cordial tone. “Cox, let us have tea at once, and tell the young ladies Sir Anthony Staunton is here,” and then, as the neat maid went her way and left them alone, turned to him again and said, “I had quite given myself up to a brown study. Oh, no, I am not alone,—not alone in the house, that is—but the girls are very busy, and I think Madge's trousseau is answerable for their seclusion.”

Sir Anthony pulled the fingers of his gloves out, one after another, and said that he supposed a wedding made a good deal of work and worry in a house. If Mrs. Trafford had only given him a good lead—as good as he had given her—he would have gone on to say that he had no doubt one gave so much trouble that a second would scarcely be felt at all.

But Mrs. Trafford, in spite of her being the undeniably clever little woman that she was, did not perceive the drift of his remark, and really did not give him a lead at all. Instead, she entered into a playful and voluble account of the fearful amount of patience this wedding in particular was costing her.

“ My dear Sir Anthony,” she exclaimed, “ it is wearing me to death—to—death. The worry of planning and arranging, the anxiety lest everything should not be ready by the day, the dreadful way in which the tiresome trades-people upset *all* one’s plans is really something terrible. And Madge is a perfect slave, poor child, without leisure even to choose her own garments, to say nothing of giving any time to forwarding matters. And if I say a word to Marcus, he just says: ‘ My dear Mrs. Traff’, why worry? I have seen to Madge’s wedding gown, and for the rest it really won’t matter.’ However,” with a sigh, “ it is a worry and an anxiety which is very pleasant, and I feel amply repaid every time I see the two together.”

“ Yes, they are a handsome couple,” put in Sir

Anthony, who felt it would an unheard-of piece of cheek to coolly propose to saddle the poor little woman with a second such load of expense and trouble.

“Very. Oh, I am very proud of my niece and my nephew to be, I assure you,” and then she smoothed out her handiwork and said, “Is not that a pretty colour? I am knitting Marcus half-a-dozen pairs of socks.”

If Sir Anthony had had any sense—that is common sense—he would at once have expressed a wish that he might be lucky enough to get half-a-dozen pairs of lovely silk socks knitted for him. Unfortunately, he had no sense of that kind, only a sense of shame-facedness, which set him thinking about the number of times the little woman’s needles would go click-click against one another before those twelve socks would be finished and ready for wearing; and for the very life and soul of him he could not then have hinted to her what in truth was lying so very near to his heart.

After a few minutes Cox appeared with the tea-tray and some delicious-looking hot buttered scones, for Mrs. Trafford knew far too well the heart—and other regions—of man to trust to the fascinations of thin bread and butter, which generally means that the loaf is stale.

“The young ladies are at home, Cox?” Mrs. Trafford asked, wondering why Laura had not made her appearance.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cox replied, settling with care the

position of the tea-things, "the young ladies will be here directly," and then she departed.

Mrs. Trafford raised her eyes from her work and looked with a smile at Staunton.

"It means bonnets," she said, nodding her head and smiling again. "Whenever I am kept waiting by one of the girls now, I generally find out that bonnets have had something to do with it."

"But what do they do with so many bonnets?" he asked.

"Wear them, my dear Sir Anthony," returned the lady promptly, "or rather Madge will, dear child."

But Staunton was thoroughly mystified and could not imagine what the bonnets which would be worn on some future day by Orford's bride elect, could have to do with Mrs. Trafford being continually kept waiting by her daughters. As a matter of fact however, one of the chief features of Madge's trousseau was a hat or bonnet to match each one of her dresses, and as that would have meant the expenditure of a great deal of money—to have them all from a good milliner, that is—Madge had chosen to have three or four sent to her from a first-rate woman in Town, and had planned the others herself. But Orford was in St. Eve's so many hours out of the waking ones which went to make up a day, that Madge had but the mornings for work, and her cousins were obliged to help her, so that while she pinned her pretty head-coverings together, Laura had to undertake the secure stitching of them.

However, Mrs. Trafford did not enter into all this, and Staunton, not understanding her allusion to bonnets, pursued the subject no further. A few minutes later the girls came in together, when he found his heart beating so furiously that he had scarce breath enough to answer Julia's high-spoken, hail-fellow-well-met style of greeting.

"Ah! how d'do, Sir Anthony," she called out—she was quite close to him, so that there was really no need for this storm-at-sea kind of voice—"Did you think we were never coming? I hope you didn't think us rude. Fact was, Laura and I were awfully busy. You've no idea what a lot there is to do for a wedding."

It was still the same cry—the trouble of a wedding; and Sir Anthony felt absolutely wicked even to be *thinking* of putting them all about in this way on his account. He wondered how Orford could have the face to go coolly in and out as he did, with his separate tea-tray and all the other privileges—such as crimson silken socks, and a room set apart for him, which appertained to the position of bridegroom-elect.

"No," he said in answer to Julia's assertion that he had no idea what a lot there is to do for a wedding, "that's very true—and I don't think I particularly want to know."

Almost as the words left his tongue, he repented them, and could have bitten off the end of that blundering and unruly member for saying them. In truth they conveyed quite a different impression

to that which he intended, and he made haste to try and repair his mistake.

“At least, that is, I mean—Oh! how do you do, Miss Laura?—I mean that, of course, I should be only too glad to be having the trouble of arranging for *my* wedding—what poor, miserable, unmarried beggar wouldn’t? Only, it seems that men have such an awful lot of trouble on their own account, lawyers, and settlements, and presents, and bouquets, and orange-blossoms, and the rest, that if he really—er—knew, that is comprehended, all the trouble the bride and her people have, a man would never have the cheek to propose getting married at all.”

He felt that it was a lame and a miserable explanation, and stole a glance at Laura to see in what way it had affected her. Apparently she was quite unmoved by it, and was busying herself with the tea-tray, in spite of a despairing protest from Mrs. Trafford to leave that matter to her. But, in truth, she was so deeply wounded by his first speech that, in the effort to control her feelings and hide her pain, she never even heard the second. Julia, on the contrary, did hear, and answered it.

“Oh! I don’t know—of course it’s a lot of trouble, and it’s part of the business to make a great fuss, but in reality everybody *likes* a wedding.”

“Everybody,” put in Mrs. Trafford with an indulgent smile; “for my part, I won’t hesitate to say I love them.”

As far as Sir Anthony was concerned personally, it was an admirably wise little speech; but, unfor-

tunately, Laura, still stinging under the supposed slight conveyed in Sir Anthony's untimely words, cast at that moment such a look of reproach and fury at her mother, whom she knew was on the watch to help her, that he fairly quailed before it. He could be dense at times, but he understood *that*, or thought he did, which amounted to very much the same thing.

Mrs. Trafford, however, did not happen to see the look, and went serenely on.

"I think most people do like them, and though it's really very foolish, they often pretend that they don't. I had Mrs. Antrobus here yesterday, and really," with a gay laugh, "if her wedding does not come off soon, I should not like to be answerable for the consequences. Poor thing, she is so stout and seems to feel exertion so terribly, and yet is so indomitably active in spite of it all. And she says that, really it is *most* ex-tra-ord-inary, that while they have five LARGE sitting-rooms at the River House, the engaged couple seem to occupy them *all* at once. 'And I assure you, my dear Mrs. Traf-FORD,' she ended, 'I came to see you to-day because I felt sure I should find a sympathetic soul.'"

"And did she?" Staunton enquired.

"No, I cannot say that she did, particularly," answered Mrs. Trafford. "Of course, I told her I was very sorry for her being worried in this way, and said I thought it a pity for engaged people not to control their feelings and remember that a great

display of affection is always embarrassing and very often distasteful to others. Then she asked me how my love-birds comported themselves ; upon which I told her that they comported themselves exceedingly well."

It was good for Staunton's blundering awkwardness, and for Laura's sensitive desire to shrink out of his sight altogether if possible, that at this point they all went off into fits of laughter at the idea of Marcus Orford being called a love-bird.

" What a joke for the fellows," Staunton laughed. " Orford will be known as 'the love-bird' for the rest of his natural life."

" I hope not. Madge will not like that," Mrs. Trafford said, laughing ; " and she, dear child, is most punctilious about her manner to him in public."

At that moment the maid, Cox, entered the room, and presented a card to her mistress. Mrs. Trafford took it, and examined it through her double eye-glasses, then turned to Sir Anthony.

" You will excuse me for a few minutes, Sir Anthony, I am sure. It is a matter of important business."

" Oh, certainly," said he, with a bow.

" Thank you."

Her manner was very grave as he held the door open for her to go out, and she gave him an equally grave bend of her head in token of thanks for the courtesy.

Julia looked at Laura with raised eyebrows, as Sir Anthony closed the door, and said :

“Do you think I had better go, Laurie?”

“Mother would have asked you, if she had wanted you,” said Laura, mindful of the fact that her sister’s departure would leave her alone with Sir Anthony.

So Julia, thus answered and apparently satisfied, sat down again, and applied herself once more to the neat little pile of hot buttered scones.



CHAPTER X.

A BURDEN OF SORROW.

“I am a poor, lonely girl, whom God has set here in an evil world, and given her only a white robe, and bid her give it back to Him, as white as when she put it on.”

—HAWTHORNE.

THE card which Cox had brought to her mistress bore the name of “Mrs. Charles Farquhar,” and below it was written, in pencil: “Can I see you *alone* for a few minutes? Of the gravest importance.”

Of course she never thought for an instant of denying herself after such an appeal—in fact, I do not think she would at any time have denied herself to Mrs. Farquhar, who was a woman she well-liked and respected. But she rose and went out of the room with a horrible dread knocking at her heart, for an idea had all at once seized her that Mrs. Farquhar had come to tell her that which would put an end to Orford’s engagement with Madge; and, I am bound to say, that at the thought of Madge’s almost completed wedding outfit, Mrs. Trafford’s careful soul was sick within her.

But Mrs. Farquhar had come on no such mission. She rose when Mrs. Trafford entered the little library, and at once blurted out the nature of her errand.

“Oh! Mrs. Trafford,” she said, “I’m in such horrible trouble—I don’t know which way to turn. I’ve come to you because there’s not a soul in Blankhampton I can trust, except you, for my sister has gone to San Remo for the winter, and, with Charlie in Egypt, I am at my wits’ end—I am indeed. I don’t know which way to turn, except to you.”

Mrs. Trafford saw by the poor soul’s white and haggard face that her trouble was indeed dire and of the worst, and she was not the woman to make little of such distress as this. She gave a sigh of relief to find that her personal fears had been without foundation, but even as it passed her lips, she drew her excited visitor to the sofa and made her sit down beside her, telling her, by the motherly way in which she cuddled her trembling hand within her own, that in coming to her, she had not chosen a wrong place of refuge.

“What is it, my dear?” she asked. “Tell me all about it.”

But, for a moment, Mrs. Farquhar could not tell her what the trouble was; an indignant wave of colour swept across her face and faded out, leaving it more white and haggard than before. Then she burst out. “Oh! Mrs. Trafford, they are saying in the town that it was *I* who went off that night with Captain Graham—I—I! And I don’t know what to do—I don’t know how to prove my innocence. I haven’t a soul I can turn to, and I feel as if I must be going mad.”

Mrs. Trafford looked so thoroughly astounded, that, for a moment, the other thought she was turning against her.

“Don’t say that you believe it!” she cried. “It will be my only hope gone.”

“Believe it!” repeated Mrs. Trafford, in utter scorn. “My dear, it’s absurd. I don’t believe any woman on earth would go off with such a little toad. I don’t think *any*-body in their senses will ever believe that such a thought entered your mind for an instant.”

“But, they do—they have!” cried Mrs. Farquhar wildly. “And some people have cut me already—already.”

“But you must disprove it,” said Mrs. Trafford firmly, for she wanted to get rid of the chaff of distress and indignation, so as better to see and judge of the grains of truth which lay beneath.

“I cannot,” said the other sadly. “I cannot!”

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense, my dear; *you must!*” cried Mrs. Trafford sharply. “It will be the easiest thing in the world. We all know the date on which the scandal-mongers declared the elopement took place—I can fix it positively both by my diary and by my visiting book, which will prove conclusively that I had heard the rumour that afternoon, and that you were present at an afternoon tea at my house that very day. My dear, a dozen people would be able to swear to it.”

“Yes, I know; I have thought of all that,” with a hopeless shake of the head.

“And you must bring someone to show where you were the previous evening—*the evening*, in short,” Mrs. Trafford went on briskly.

Mrs. Farquhar shook her head more despairingly even than before.

“That is just what I cannot get over. I can’t bring anyone to speak for me then.”

“But why? You will tell me?” coaxingly.

“Oh, Mrs. Trafford, there is no secret about it; I had meant to keep it so, but all the world may know now”—and then she told her all the circumstances of that painful night’s work, not omitting a single word from beginning to end.

Little Mrs. Trafford opened her eyes wide indeed at the story, and at the end of it she spoke her mind and gave her counsel.

“Of course, my dear, it is very good and loyal of you to wish to shield this unhappy and miserable woman—whom God above help if her heart is in any-way touched by that man, Graham: but, at the same time, you have your life’s happiness and that of your husband to think of and guard, and, as Mrs. Hildersley has not taken much care of her good name, I do not see that you need make such great sacrifices in order to do it for her. Probably the story will die a natural death, as scandal so often does; if it does not, you must simply insist upon Mrs. Hildersley speaking up in your vindication.”

The unhappy victim of gossip drew a long breath as Mrs. Trafford came to the end of her say—a long

breath, which was neither more nor less than a gasp for air.

“Mrs. Trafford,” she said, in a piteous tone, “I hardly expect you to credit it—but *it is Mrs. Hildersley herself* who brings this awful accusation against me !”

“*Impossible!*” Mrs. Trafford burst out.

“No, it is not impossible, it is true. I heard it from Mrs. Forster, to whom she had told it, and I went across to her at once. ‘Emily,’ I said, ‘when you needed it I stood by you and did you a great service, and now the time has come when you must stand by me,’ and—and—she——” but at this point the poor soul’s pent-up indignation and distress could be kept prisoner no longer and burst out in a storm of wild grief, such as Mrs. Trafford had never seen in all her life before. She let her cry on in peace for a little time, and then made an effort to get her to finish her story.

“Now—now, dear,” she urged, “pray try to tell me everything there is to know. It is no use my entering into the case with but half a brief, you know.”

“She asked me how I *dared* go to her on such an errand—how I *dared* try to fasten my guilt on her. *My guilt!*” with a wild, hysterical laugh. “*I,—* who wouldn’t touch him with a pair of tongs !”

“Then she ignores her share in the affair altogether ?”

“No, indeed—nothing of the kind. She simply reverses our positions, and says that *she* went to save *me*. I can’t *prove* it was otherwise. I did go—and, as she reminded me, ‘You went *by yourself* to Captain Graham’s office, and were seen by several people leaving it. His orderly was at hand and probably heard you imploring him for some favour; at all events, his wife told me you had been there and that he was very cold to you. And so, you wicked woman,’ she said—yes, she called me a wicked woman—‘after all I have done for you, this is the reward you give me. I don’t know,’ she ended, ‘*how you have the audacity to face me.*’ So you see, Mrs. Trafford, what a complete trap I am in. I can only tell the truth, and I must admit that the true story sounds by far the most improbable one of the two.”

“It is shameful!” Mrs. Trafford cried in disgust and anger.

“But you believe me?” asked Mrs. Farquhar, timidly.

“Oh, my dear! Believe you?—as implicitly as I believe in that Providence above us, which will unmask this wicked plot against you and make the triumph of the innocent complete and unassailable”—and with this she opened her arms, and her unhappy guest crept into them and laid her head upon her shoulders, feeling that she had got into Sanctuary.

For a long time they sat thus, silent; and at last,

Mrs. Trafford spoke, quoting a few lines of a poem, in a tone which betokened deep thought :

“ For Jenny, my cousin, had come to the place, and I knew right well

That Jenny had tript in her time: I knew, but I would not tell.
And she to be coming and slandering me, the base little liar!
But the tongue is a fire as you know, my dear, the tongue is a fire.

“ And the parson made it his text that week, and he said likewise,

That a lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies.
That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with out-right,
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.”

“ A lie which is all a lie,” Mrs. Trafford repeated.
“ Ah! that is just the difficult part of our task, my dear. Still, never mind, the right must conquer in the end.”

Mrs. Farquhar gave a long sigh.

“ If only Charlie was at home I could afford to laugh at the story and the people who believe in it and keep it floating, alike; but then, Charlie is not at home, and some kind friend will certainly be kind enough to tell him what people are saying about me. I don’t know what to do, Mrs. Trafford, nor which way to turn, and I believe I shall go out of my mind.”

“ Your husband *couldn’t* believe such a tale!” cried Mrs. Trafford indignantly.

“ He might; one never knows how a lie may take effect—and the whole sound of the thing is so dead

against me, so dead against me. I am quite prepared for it—I am quite prepared for the worst. I shall not be the least surprised if matters come to the very worst."

In truth, she was so thoroughly upset and unnerved at the superb audacity of the woman whom she had befriended and saved from perdition, that the fighting instinct, which belongs to all noble natures, had left her, and she was scarcely less helpless than a baby to resist the waves of evil, which had crept up to her innocent feet, and threatened to overwhelm her altogether.

But Mrs. Trafford was a plucky little soul, and, like a bull-dog, would fight if need was as long as breath lasted ; she would have none of this giving in and letting the wicked ride on triumphant.

"Oh ! my dear child, that is all rubbish and nonsense. It won't do to talk *or think* in that silly way ; it is foolish—foolish. The case simply stands thus—you *must* clear yourself—there is no half-way house—you *must* do it."

"But how can I do it ?" cried the other fretfully, "except by my word, and what is that worth ?"

"You can, and you must do it. Tell me, to whom have you ever mentioned this midnight excursion ?"

"I told Charlie, of course."

"That is good. Then have you mentioned it to nobody else ?"

"Only to my sister, as a secret. I told her in this very house—that afternoon, you know. But,

stay—somebody else did know, for Captain Orford overheard part of my conversation with my sister, and I begged him not to say a word about it, as I wanted to hush the whole thing up as much as possible. Ah!" she ended bitterly, "did I not play into her hands nicely? Did I not shield her well from what she has thrown on to me?"

"For a time, yes. But you say Marcus knows. Well, we must take him into our counsel. We could not do better, for his judgment is remarkably good, and, somehow, he always suggests a wise course to be followed. In any case, I am sure that you had better come and stay here till the storm has blown over and subsided one way or the other. You can shut your house up and give your servants holiday."

Mrs. Farquhar's eyes opened to their very fullest extent.

"Do you mean it?" she cried. "Will you do that? Oh! bless you! God bless you! And God *will* bless you," she ended solemnly, "He *will* bless you."

They say that prosperity hardens us and makes us arrogant and worldly, and that adversity and sorrow soften and refine our earthly natures. I don't know—I don't altogether agree with the theory. I have never known men and women whom great afflictions made kinder and more sympathetic. It is a beautiful idea, of course, but it has not been my lot to see it in practice; and I do know that a year before Mrs. Trafford would almost as soon have

GARRISON GOSSIP.

thought of jumping off the tower of “the Parish,” as of offering to take into her house a woman who was slandered by the evil tongue of scandal, and at whom was already pointed the finger of scorn.

True, she might, in her heart and soul, have believed her to be as innocent as the driven snow is white, and yet she would, not unnaturally, have hesitated to endanger her position in society, by taking up arms in her behalf against a sea of troubles of such inky blackness and overwhelming strength.

But now, it was all different! Secure by her niece’s engagement to the future Lord Ceespring, she felt herself as far above society—as society goes in Blankhampton—as the heaven is above the earth, and so the natural tenderness of a really kind heart came to the surface and took its own way untrammeled by the base considerations of self-interest and self-advancement.

Yet they say that prosperity hardens the human heart!

Ah!—“They say—what say they?—let ‘em say”—I don’t believe it.

I grant you that *the memory* of by-gone suffering, out of which we have passed into happier or more prosperous times, may, and often does, make us soft and sympathetic to the same suffering in others but *while* we are in tribulation, are we softened and made tender thereby? I don’t think so.

How, when one is in worldly adversity, one looks

out for slights and insults, aye, and finds them too, easily enough, though the giver of the slight or insult may never have meant it to be such for a moment. But *we* see it and the meaning too, quickly. We don't wait to meet such troubles half way ; oh, no ! we run across the road to shake hands with them, and we welcome them and nurse them, we coddle them and make much of them, as we never troubled to do when a blessing came along in our direction.

They call that sort of thing—Pride !

However, be that as it may, Mrs. Trafford chose to make the case of Mrs. Charles Farquhar hers, and having taken it up, she set to work with a will to clear up the mystery.

“ Come and take off your coat and hat, my dear,” she said, with a pleasant little air of authority which was as balm to Mrs. Farquhar’s stricken soul. “ You shall have some tea and be made much of, and we will take Marcus into our counsel and see what he can suggest to help us. And after that, we will take a cab and fetch what things you will require to wear, and arrange what to do with your servants, and so on. Now, come with me.”

Mrs. Trafford was a little woman who had always had her admirers, but in all her life she had never been worshipped as Charles Farquhar’s wife worshipped her at that moment.

“ Mrs. Trafford,” she said, half-hesitatingly, “ do you think you would mind calling me Georgie ? ”

“No, my poor Georgie, I am quite sure I should not,” she answered kindly, and there were tears in her eyes as she said it.

Then she took her up to her own room and bathed her tear-stained face with rose water, waiting on her and tending her as if she had been a child.

“There! you look quite like yourself again,” she exclaimed, giving a last touch to her visitor’s soft golden curls. “So come along, and we will enjoy our fresh tea and hot scones. I am sure all this excitement must have made you very faint and hungry. I wonder if you have had anything to eat to-day.”

“Not very much,” answered poor Georgie with a forced smile.

“Some people,” said Mrs. Trafford, “would give you wine and make your head ache beyond endurance. I shall dose you in my own way, and make you quite yourself again,” and then she opened the door into the drawing-room and introduced her guest by merely saying that she had persuaded Mrs. Farquhar to take her hat and coat off, and would Julia give them some tea?

The tea was fresh and of the best, the buttered scones were hot and delicious, and before many minutes Mrs. Farquhar, poor soul, began to feel strengthened and comforted, and as if this brisk and capable little woman in whom she had put all her trust, would succeed after all in pulling her out of the trap into which her innocent feet had led her.

And presently Sir Anthony, who saw that something very serious was in the wind, said good-afternoon and departed, feeling that he was not wanted there just then. Mrs. Trafford slipped back into her old self as she laid her hand in his.

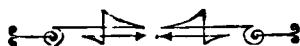
“*Good-bye, Sir Anthony. I want you to come and dine with us, quite in a friendly way, the day after to-morrow. Can you ?*”

“*Oh ! I shall be charmed—charmed,*” said Sir Anthony, whose looks did not belie his words in the least.

“*Half-past-seven ; then we shall expect you. Good-bye,*” said the little widow blithely.

She whispered to Laura to fetch Madge and Marcus if possible, going back herself to her guest at once. Presently, the three came in together, laughing and joking ; and perhaps Orford looked a little surprised when he saw Mrs. Farquhar so thoroughly at home, but Mrs. Trafford, holding her hand fast all the time, told them the story as I have told it you already.

“*And now, my dear boy,*” she ended, “*we await your advice.*”



CHAPTER XI.

THE TALK OF THE TOWN.

“Slugs crawl and crawl over our cabbages, like the world’s slander over a good name. You may kill them, it is true, but there is the slime.”

—DOUGLAS JERROLD.

ORFORD’s advice was promptly given, and it was distinguished by plenty of sound common sense, although he deprecated the idea of his being of any real use in a case of such difficulty, and in the face of such exquisite audacity as Mrs. Hildersley had shown in deliberately shifting the weight of scandal off her own shoulder on to those of her friend.

“I’m not a clever chap,” he said regretfully, “and it seems to me in a delicate affair like this, you want a cool, far-seeing, calculating brain like Urquhart’s to unravel such a business.”

“But, my dear Marcus, we have not got Colonel Urquhart at our service just now, and we have you,” put in his aunt-by-marriage elect. “Tell us what you think?”

“Urquhart’s your man, Mrs. Traff’, I assure you,” Orford persisted.

“He might not care to be drawn into it,” Mrs. Farquhar suggested timidly.

“Urquhart is as good as gold, if you want help of any kind,” Orford declared; “and he’s such a ’cute, far-seeing beggar, that I should like to have his

advice on the matter. Do you mind my telling him about it, when I go back to barracks? You don't mind its being known?"

"I can't help it—it is known," Mrs. Farquhar cried.

"And the sooner *everybody* knows that she has taken refuge with me from all the evil-speaking, lying, and slandering that goes on in this hot-bed of scandal and gossip, the better," supplemented Mrs. Trafford severely. "Still, let us hear what you think, Marcus."

"Well, Mrs. Traff," said Orford, "I think that——" and here he bit the uncomplimentary term "she-devil" off the end of his tongue, "that Mrs. Hildersley ought to be ducked. But as that's impracticable, I think she ought to be hounded out of society altogether—and it won't be any fault of mine if she isn't. But that's an affair of the future—for the present, it seems to me the first thing to do is to prevent her getting at Farquhar."

"Getting at Charlie!" exclaimed Charlie's wife in dismay. "How can she do that?"

"I don't mean at him personally, but she is safe to take steps to make sure that this precious story of hers shall reach his ears."

Mrs. Farquhar's pale face flushed scarlet.

"Oh, do you think she will dare go so far as that?"

Orford could not help smiling.

"Desperation will dare anything," he said.

“And the first thing to do is to prevent her brewing mischief with him—if it’s not too late already.”

“I will go out to Charlie. I’ll start to-morrow,” the unhappy woman cried. “I’ll go to him at once.”

“You must do nothing of the kind,” returned Orford sharply. “What you have to do is to get to the very bottom of this business and force the truth out of that woman. By running away—whether you go to your husband or not—you will give colour to the story, and then *every* one is bound to believe it. No, believe me, Mrs. Farquhar, your *only* course is to stop here and fight the thing out, inch by inch if need be. And, to begin with, I should telegraph to Farquhar at once, now.”

“Yes? And you would say—?” eagerly.

“I should say that you are staying with Mrs. Trafford, and that he is to open no English letters until he receives one from you. You must write to-night.”

Mrs. Farquhar looked down at her shaking fingers in a doubt that was unmistakable.

“She cannot, poor darling,” cried Mrs. Trafford, with sudden and fresh pity. “She is too thoroughly upset by this vile slander to write a line to anybody.”

“Then will you write for her?” Orford asked. “Or would you like me to do it?”

“I wish you would,” cried Mrs. Trafford eagerly. “I will write a short letter of course, but I do not

really think I could sit down and put all the story on paper. And what about the telegram?"

"That ought to go at once. I'll go out and send it now if you like, and then will write the letter between that and dinner-time."

"You are very good," faltered Mrs. Trafford's guest. "I don't know why you should take so much trouble for me, Captain Orford."

"Because I have a very great respect for you, Mrs. Farquhar. And because I should be sorry for your husband to be in trouble whilst he is over in that loathsome country, which has already cost the English people more happiness than they can afford to lose. And—and I confess I should like to see that brazen woman bested—I always detested her," he added with some hesitation, as if he was half-ashamed of cherishing such feelings towards a woman.

"I quite agree with you," said Mrs. Trafford without any hesitation whatever—she had no nice feelings of chivalry to contend against, and would dearly like to have seen Mrs. Hildersley crushed and abject, down in the very dust of the earth.

Eventually, this was the form of warning which went speeding by wire and cable into the land of the Pharoahs that night.

"Marcus Orford, the Black Horse, Blankhampton, to Captain Charles Farquhar, the Blankshire Regiment, Alipah, Egypt.

"Your wife is staying with Mrs. Trafford, and will

remain there until she hears from you. Don't be uneasy about her, whatever you may have heard. Open no English letters until you get one from me posted this evening, which will explain this telegram fully. If you can get leave, return home as soon as possible. She is in good health."

"Charlie will be frightened out of his senses," exclaimed Mrs. Farquhar, trembling like an aspen, poor unnerved thing.

"Oh no, he'll guess pretty nearly what it means," replied Orford, soothingly. "And it's not long to wait for the explanation, while, if that treacherous cat has got at him, it will set his mind at rest, and start him working for leave."

"I wonder if he will be able to get it," said Mrs. Trafford.

"If he's got any sense he'll just go sick," Orford answered, "and after all the doctors are very good, they'll always stretch a point in a case of real need. I knew a fellow once," he went on, as he folded the paper on which the message for Farquhar was written, "whose wife got awfully ill from the climate in India. She'd had a lot of trouble out there, lost child after child, and at last her heart gave out, and the doctors declared there was nothing for it but coming home. Well, she refused to come home without her husband—said she'd rather die. Anyway, she wouldn't come without him, although her passage was taken and he did his best to persuade her. No, she said she'd

rather die; and as there seemed every chance of her dying if she didn't come home, the doctors said to him, 'Well, you'd better go sick too; you've been looking seedy for a good bit, so we'll sit on you and certify you sick,'—and so they did, and they came home together as happy as could be. She was a pretty soul," Orford ended; "I saw them the last time I was in Town."

Before an hour passed Orford had sent the telegram and had almost completed the letter which would tell Charles Farquhar, in plain unvarnished terms, how his wife had become the victim through her own generous-hearted goodness of the venom of an unscrupulous and wicked woman.

"She is naturally thoroughly upset by all this miserable business," he ended, "and as nervous as a cat; but personally you needn't worry about her, for Mrs. Trafford is the kindest of women and believes in her goodness and innocence implicitly. But pray do you, my dear Farquhar, work all you know for leave, that you may come home and help us to unmask this d—d traitress, for whom, in my humble opinion, hanging is too good and cleanly an end. Meantime, you may rely upon me to take your place and knock any fellow down who presumes to say a word against your wife in my presence. I wish Graham would. Ever, my dear Farquhar, Your sincere friend,

"MARCUS ORFORD."

It was a characteristic letter, and represented Marcus Orford to the very life.

And when it was gone, they all seemed to be at a standstill until there should come an answer to it. Colonel Urquhart was consulted through Orford and came down to St. Eve's and talked the matter over; but as Mrs. Hildersley obstinately stuck to her story, and as Graham gave corroborative evidence, nobody could move in the absence of Charles Farquhar or without instructions from him.

Mrs. Hildersley and Graham had ceased to be friends entirely, in fact his fury at her listening to Mrs. Farquhar's persuasions had been so great, that he had cut her dead from that moment. So in keeping them apart, poor little Georgie, as they had all come to call her in St. Eve's, had raised up two deadly enemies against herself, enemies whose hatred would be deadly to their lives' end.

For Mrs. Hildersley, in consenting to remember her children and forbear to take that step which would have been irrevocable, ending only in destruction, had had no intention of giving up *her friend*, and the bitterness of seeing the man who had been openly at her feet for months past, pass her by without so much as a lock, had made her furious against the woman who had brought it about.

And on his part, Graham, who prided himself on being altogether irresistible, could not forgive the woman who, brave and plucky soul that she was, had wrested his prey from his grasp even at the eleventh hour.

Not that he even made an effort to forgive the blow to his pride and vanity. Not he! On the contrary, he vowed a vow that he would leave no stone unturned to be what he called “even with her.” No stone unturned! He had not far to look for a stone to turn, for there was that great ugly fact of her visit to his office, damaging enough to overwhelm any woman. And he turned that stone, aye, turned it and turned it again with the hand of a master, a master of wickedness—he moved it an inch here or an inch there so that it should lie just in the way, a big ugly stumbling block that nobody could get over or over-look—poor little Georgie least of all.

Mrs. Trafford tried her best. She went straight at it with the energy of one who has the courage of her opinions; she explained it—she made it as clear as day-light, but in spite of her determined efforts, it remained to the world at large a stumbling-block that there was no getting over, or under, or round.

Meantime, the story had spread from one end of Blankhampton to the other, and was literally raging in all classes of society. It was *the* topic of the day. People even forgot that To-To Antrobus’s wedding was drawing very near now, and the details thereof were simply a drug in the market. To-To might have changed her mind at that time and instead of fulfilling her engagement with the festive Herrick she might have married the King of Siam, with all the pomp and ceremony of the Cæsars and the Czars

combined, and, in the face of the mystery as to whether it was Mrs. Hildersley or Mrs. Farquhar who started to run away with Captain Graham on an eventful night a few weeks previously, nobody would have thought it a matter of much importance.

As a matter of absolute fact, a good deal of the gilt was wearing off the ginger-bread of To-To's engagement, and, now that the wedding was drawing close at hand, it turned out to be none such a grand alliance after all. Rumours crept about that the festive Herrick was "a jealous, ill-tempered brute," and dark hints began to pass to and fro, that he had more than once done his very best to shuffle out of the affair altogether. Anyway, it is quite certain that a plated tea and coffee service was all that his immediate relations, combined, bestowed upon the bride as a wedding-gift, which, to the Antrobus family and their friends and acquaintances, served almost to clear the gingerbread of gilding entirely.

As for Mrs. Hugh, she was eloquent about that plated service, and descanted upon the subject to Polly in quite her own peculiar style.

"I *never* thought," she wound up, "that a child of *mine* would marry a plated tea and coffee service! But *these new* people are all show."

CHAPTER XII.

WAITING.

“O Woman! in ordinary cases so mere a mortal, how, in the great and rare events of life, dost thou swell into the angel!”

—LORD LYTTON.

MRS. HUGH ANTROBUS'S face was a study when she heard, as she did from Mr. Winks, that Mrs. Farquhar had taken refuge in the house of Mrs. Trafford.

“My dear Lord Charterhouse,” she gasped, “you really must be mistaken!”

But Mr. Winks shook his head.

“No, Mrs. Antrobus,” he maintained. “It's perfectly true—as true as gospel.”

“But I am sure Mrs. Traf-FORD would *never* lend herself to such—such a—a—*person*,” she persisted.

“She has done so, anyway. Stakes her friendship with everybody on the final issue,” he replied. “Upon my word, I never heard such a hubbub as there is all over the garrison, and I do believe, if Graham doesn't clear out of it pretty soon, he'll be getting lynched or ducked, or something equally unpleasant.”

“And the majority *believe* in Mrs. Farquhar?” cried Mrs. Hugh, as if such a Delilah as poor little

Georgie had never polluted the sacred air of Blank-hampton since she had first shed the somewhat greasy radiance of her extensive countenance upon the old city.

“Believe in her?” repeated Mr. Winks with a chuckle. “Yes, that they do; and small wonder, for she’s a nice little woman, and a good little woman too. I don’t believe she’d touch Graham with a pair of tongs. Anyway, as soon as ever she heard what people were saying about her, she went off to Mrs. Trafford, and threw herself upon her protection.”

“What? *asked* her to take her in?”

“Oh, that I can’t say for certain. But Mrs. Trafford *did* take her in, and means to stick to her until Farquhar comes home. They’ve telegraphed for him.”

“*They?* Who?” Mrs. Hugh asked, beginning to feel that she had backed the wrong horse in going for the other side.

“Oh!—er—Orford did that, I believe.”

“What? Is *he* mixed up in it?” How she wished she had never mentioned the miserable story to anyone. Unfortunately, in spite of her absorbing interest in the almost endless stream of self-gloryfying prattle about the approaching marriage festivities, Mrs. Hugh had found time to mention the Graham-Hildersley-Farquhar scandal to almost every single person with whom she had lately come in contact, and, with equally bad fortune, she had mentioned it in the tone of one who wished to be

the champion of Mrs. Hildersley. “Is *he* mixed up in it?” she asked hopelessly.

“Oh, rather! But only as pretty nearly half the fellows in the garrison are mixed up in it,” Mr. Winks replied. “Orford and the Colonel are very keen about it too—in fact, Orford has announced everywhere that he means to knock any fellow down who presumes to say a single word against Mrs. Farquhar in his hearing. Consequently, for days past, the fellows in our regiment have been trying all they know how to get Graham to lunch or dinner, in the hope that Orford may have a chance of carrying his threat into effect.”

“Do you think he would? Captain Orford, I mean,” Mrs. Hugh asked.

“What? Knock him down? Why, yes, like a bird, to be sure, and enjoy it beyond everything,” Mr. Winks cried, with a gay laugh. “But he won’t, because he won’t have the chance—Graham will take care of that, the little toad.”

Eventually, Mr. Winks, after giving Mrs. Hugh all the details of the affair that he knew, went away, leaving that good lady in an exceedingly perturbed state of mind. It was quite early in the afternoon, and Mr. Winks had found her alone, her brood being all away in different parts of the town.

She went out into the hall as soon as he had gone, meeting Jane on her way from opening the door to let him out.

“Jane, I—I am not at home,” she said hurriedly. “I am going out presently.”

“Very well, ‘m,” said Jane.

Thus set free from the chance of being disturbed, Mrs. Hugh went up into her bedroom to think what should be her next move? She had not the smallest idea of sticking to Mrs. Hildersley and proclaiming herself her champion, as Mrs. Trafford had done for Mrs. Farquhar; nor had she the smallest idea of losing Mrs. Trafford’s friendship by letting the affair drop and minding her own business. Not she! On the contrary, she had every intention of shaking herself free of Mrs. Hildersley, and going in red-hot as the upholder and protector of outraged innocence, to whom she could offer a capacious and motherly wing, so as to ease the little woman in St. Eve’s of her self-imposed labour of love.

But she did not quite know how to set about it; as a matter of fact, to speak with uncompromising plainness, she hadn’t quite enough “cheek” to go boldly forward and announce that she was Mrs. Farquhar’s friend in the matter.

However, she felt—and she was about right there—that it was no use sitting and staring at the terraces and the river; so she roused herself and tired her head, and made ready for the fray, putting on her best bonnet and her newest pair of gloves.

And thus arrayed in all her glory, she waddled down to St. Eve’s, and in an incredibly short time—considering that she travelled about seventeen stones—was standing at Mrs. Trafford’s door awaiting admittance.

Yes, Mrs. Trafford was at home, Cox informed her. So she was taken upstairs and ushered into the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. Trafford —still busy with the crimson silken socks—alone.

She rose, with an inward groan, as her visitor entered, and Mrs. Hugh explained herself.

“How do you do, Mrs. Traf-FORD?” she enquired, with her most interested air. “I hope you won’t think me a nuisance to come so soon again?”

“Not at all—I am charmed, I am sure,” returned Mrs. Trafford, with an affable, but at the same time distinctly condescending, manner.

“When I finished lunch, I had as much intention of calling on *you* to-day, as I had upon the MAN in the MOON,” Mrs. Hugh went on with her gayest and most neighbourly little laugh.

Mrs. Trafford bent her head and smiled a little, as a polite hostess would. Mrs. Hugh explained matters further.

“But the fa—ct was, my girls had all gone out and I was quite alone, when Lord CHARTER-HOUSE came to see me, and—er—from him I heard—well—er—what, of course, must be the truth about this terrible scandal that is simply demoralising the town.”

Mrs. Trafford let the crimson sock and the bright steel knitting needles fall upon her knee.

“You mean about Mrs. Farquhar?”

“Yes—er—is it true that she is with you?”

“Oh! yes, and will stop here until her husband comes home.”

“And will that be soon?”

“Very soon; he starts from Alexandria tomorrow.”

“Oh! really. Well, I needn’t ask you if you believe in her, for of course, you must do so.”

Mrs. Hugh was beginning to get a little nervous now that she was getting near the chief point in her mission.

“I do, implicitly,” said Mrs. Trafford, apparently noticing nothing unusually flurried in her visitor’s manner, and speaking very gravely. “She is as innocent as a baby—as a baby. I don’t think a good, true woman was ever so cruelly wronged before.”

“Mrs. Hildersley came to me”—Mrs. Hugh began.

“To you? When?” cried Mrs. Trafford sharply.

“It was some little time ago—and—really she made out such a sad story of Mrs. Farquhar’s ingratitude, that I—I believed her. I assure you I never had a suspicion of the truth until Lord Charterhouse told me all about it this afternoon; and I felt I must come—I didn’t wait for any of them to come home—I just put on my things and came at once. I felt I must. I couldn’t rest until I had really learned the truth, and had made my peace with her, poor thing, for having doubted her.”

“It is very good of you, very sweet and motherly,” exclaimed Mrs. Trafford, and forthwith she dropped

her little air of affable condescension and told Mrs. Hugh all about it. "Poor child," she ended, "she is almost frantic at times to think that such a slander should have been fastened on her, and she has no idea of facing it out and living it down as a false woman would have. On the contrary, her only desire, until Captain Farquhar gets home, is to get out of sight, to creep out of the way. She was here when you knocked at the door, but she ran away as if you had been a policeman come to carry her off to prison."

So the two fraternized and made friends over the affair, and, presently, Mrs. Trafford persuaded poor little Georgie to come down and see Mrs. Hugh and receive from her the assurance that she had one more friend in Blankhampton than she knew of.

She was very simple in her manner to her new champion and more cold than Mrs. Hugh could have wished; but the good lady took no heed of that, for it was better for her to be on cool good terms, than on warm bad ones. But later, when Mrs. Hugh had departed, with a remark that her young people would all be impatiently awaiting her, she said to Mrs. Trafford that she had no idea Mrs. Antrobus and she were such intimate friends.

"My dear," returned Mrs. Trafford, in a tone which implied that in ever having such an idea at any time she was acting most unreasonably, "Mrs. Antrobus is the *very last* person in the world I should make a friend of; but it is well that everybody should know that you are here and exactly

how you are here, and she will spread the news thereof better than anybody else in the whole Town, excepting Colonel Coles, who is already on our side. Now, do you see?"

"Yes, perfectly," with a faint smile, then nestling her hand into that of her protector, "I'm so glad she's not a *friend* of yours. I think she's such a horrid woman," she burst out. "There's something so—so artificial, so false about her, and she does glorify herself so awfully—and—and—I don't like her. I don't believe she's my friend at all. I've an instinctive feeling against her; perhaps it's wrong, but I can't bear her."

"Neither can I," rejoined Mrs. Trafford promptly, "she's so greasy and plausible. But she will help us in her way, I've no doubt."

Oh! society, society, society! *What a game it is!* Mrs. Hugh had gone home to the bosom of her family beaming and triumphant, because she had taken the bull by the horns and had come out of an exceedingly awkward and unpleasant situation with flying colours. She did not care the twentieth part of one poor scruple whether Mrs. Hildersley or Mrs. Farquhar, or both, had wanted to run away with Captain Graham—either or both might just sink or swim, which they could, for aught she cared. But she did care to be on terms of confidence and intimacy with "dear Mrs. Traf-FORD," and to encompass that most desirable end she would have gone in single-handed and fought the cause of either against the world.

And having succeeded so well, she went home beaming and triumphant. Well she might. But, oh! if she had but known that Mrs. Trafford was only making use of her to gain her own ends! If she had but known that Mrs. Trafford had no more intention of any ensuing intimacy with her, than she had of taking up Mrs. Hildersley's cause! If she had only known it—but, then, she didn't, and perhaps it was better that it was so.

We should all be pretty well let down if we knew our neighbours' honest opinion of us—our relations generally take care that we do not remain in ignorance of theirs and it is most often a brutally honest one, a good deal more honest than we find palatable. But just try to imagine what our feelings would be like, if we suddenly discovered that Mrs. A. had asked us to her party, not because she wanted us, but because she couldn't make up her number without us; or that Mrs. B. had been civil because Mrs. C. had been civil, and she wasn't going to be "cut out" by her! We should feel very uncomfortable and unpleasant, and after all, it is much better that we should go on in our blissful ignorance, and go to our parties honestly believing we have been asked simply because Mrs. A., and Mrs. B., and Mrs. C. consider us pleasant, agreeable people, and for no other reason. So it was, doubtless, much better that Mrs. Traf-FORD and Mrs. Hugh should each believe they had—to speak vulgarly—done the other in the social eye. Oh, yes, it was much

better, very much better. For Mrs. Hugh went to and fro in the land, and enlarged blandly on the shameful way in which Mrs. Farquhar, sweet little woman that she was, had been slandered, and even more emphatically on the scandalous way in which Mrs. Hildersley had tried to get her, Mrs. Hugh, that is, on her side; and by thus doing, she exactly fulfilled her mission. While as for Mrs. Trafford, in order to keep Mrs. Hugh faithful to the cause she went and called on her, paying quite a visitation and inspecting all To-To's presents, the tea-service included, which was put well away at the back of the table containing the presents, so that it was not easy to get a very close look at it.

And then she was introduced to the bridegroom-elect, the festive Herrick, who, unfortunately, did not quite understand—as he might have done from Mrs. Hugh's florid introduction—that she was quite so important a person as she was in Mrs. Hugh's eyes, and distinctly snubbed her, which, as Mrs. Trafford was exerting herself to be unusually civil, was rather a pity.

“A most dreadful young man,” remarked Mrs. Trafford that evening at dinner, to Orford's intense amusement. “He stood with his elbow on the mantel-shelf all the time, and pulled his moustache; and *everything* I said to him, he said: ‘Er—yers—yers.’ Really, I wonder Mrs. Antrobus can be so elated about the match.”

Marcus Orford fairly roared.

“What did you say to that, Mrs. Traff ?” he asked.

“I turned my chair well round, so that I was not oblige to include him in my conversation ; and then Lord Charterhouse was mentioned, and Mrs. Antrobus said in *her* way: ‘Oh ! we are all *very* fond of Lord Charterhouse,’ upon which that dreadful young man said, in the most patronising tone imaginable : ‘Er—yers—Cherterhouse is a very decent fell-ah !’ and then he tugged at his moustache, and said : ‘Er—yers,’ again. I *looked* at him,” Mrs. Trafford wound up.

Orford positively shook with laughter.

“What a joke, and Mr. Winks will enjoy hearing it—he *loves* him.”

So, on the whole, Mrs. Trafford’s long visit to the River House was not so successful as Mrs. Hugh would have wished. Moreover, she was not much better impressed by the little bride, To-To.

“Such a mass of affectation,” Mrs. Trafford informed her delighted audience ; “she mouthed and minced, as if she had a scalding potato in her mouth,”—it was, by-the-bye, surprising that the little lady should invariably be so frightfully down on “side” of that kind—“and she twisted her scraggy little body this way and that, until she looked like a little worm wriggling about as much as anything else. Mrs. Antrobus was really eloquent about the two. ‘Herrick is so *ex*—trav—agantly fond of her,’ she said—when he at last followed her into the hall, and I was pleased when he did ; I was so afraid he

would take root beside the mantel-shelf—‘he calls her his bit of “Dresden china fair,” and really it seems as if he can-NOT lavish enough admiration upon her. He is going to bring *real* orange-blossoms for the wedding, *real* flowers; he declares she will look more exquisitely lovely under such a wreath than any bride that ever went to the altar. And I think she will look well,’ Mrs. Antrobus added, with an air of humility and modesty which was quite touching—quite touching.”

“What did you say to that, Mrs. Traff?” enquired Orford.

“I said I had no doubt that Miss To-To would look extremely well,” returned Mrs. Trafford drily. “Mrs. Antrobus went on to tell me that Mr. Brentham is not only excessively proud of his little betrothed’s lovely face, but also of her figure—*her figure*,” repeated Mrs. Trafford, in fine contempt. “It seems little To-To was very anxious that he should buy her a sealskin coat as one of his wedding gifts to her; but Herrick wouldn’t hear of it, said he wasn’t going to have her beautiful little graceful figure bundled up in a great fur coat only fit for an old woman. I said, ‘Oh, well, he must give her dark sables—all kinds and all ages of figure look well in dark sables.’”

“‘But Herrick does not like furs of *any* description,’ rejoined Mrs. Antrobus, as if that was the most distinguished taste in the wide world.

“I suppose the truth is,” Mrs. Trafford wound up, “he finds them too expensive to like—but then

they might just as well say so honestly, without pretending that he has the income of a prince ; it's so silly,—just as some people pretend that first-class carriages are stuffy, and that that's the reason they don't use them."

"Poor Mrs. Antrobus—and poor little bride," cried Orford.

"Poor little bride," echoed Madge, thinking of the difference between To-To's groom and her's.

"By-the-bye, Mrs. Traff," Orford exclaimed. "I had a letter from my Mother to-day."

"Yes, and how is your Father?" Mrs. Trafford enquired with interest, for the long-promised visit of Lord and Lady Ceespring to Blankhampton, that they might make the acquaintance of Madge and her family before asking her to visit her future home, had been postponed again and again owing to an obstinate attack of gout, which had fluctuated from bad to worse and from worse to a state bordering on convalescence, time after time, only to break out again with renewed violence.

"The gout seems to have gone at last, and they propose coming about the middle of next week, if that will suit you."

"Oh, perfectly—perfectly," cried Mrs. Trafford, looking at Madge, who flushed and paled a little at the mere thought of such a dread ordeal.

"In that case my orders are to secure rooms at the 'Golden Swan.' My Mother says my old Dad is pining to see Madge—talks about nothing else."

"We must send out invitations at once for the

people we want to ask to meet them," said Mrs. Trafford, thinking at once of ways and means of entertaining these distinguished guests, for her guests they would be practically, although they were not actually going to stay under her roof.

"You must ask the little bride and the festive Herrick," laughed Orford. "By Jove, what an effect Mrs. Antrobus would have on my Lord."

"Marcus," said Mrs. Trafford, in the tone of one who suddenly remembers some particular bit of news. "Mrs. Antrobus hadn't the least idea, until I told her, that Lord Charterhouse is going to be married."



CHAPTER XIII.

A THUNDERBOLT.

“At every step in life we meet with young men from whom we anticipate wonderful things, but of whom, after careful inquiry, we never hear another word.”

— NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

“SHE had no idea,” said Mrs. Trafford, “that Lord Charterhouse was going to be married!”

For a full minute Marcus Orford stared at his aunt-by-marriage-elect, as if she had suddenly informed him that she had, with her own eyes, seen the gracious Liege Lady of these dominions standing on her head in the middle of the Winter Garden, or something of an equally preposterous nature.

“Mrs. Traff,” said he solemnly, “you never told Mrs. Antrobus about Mr. Winks’ engagement to Lady Nell Temple?”

“I did, indeed,” returned Mrs. Trafford, looking up innocently. “Why should I not? It is common property; in fact, I thought she knew all about it.”

Marcus Orford’s stare of astonishment relaxed into the broadest of smiles.

“My dear Mrs. Traff,” he cried, with a gay laugh, “Mrs. Antrobus didn’t know a word until you told her, not a word. Why, Mr. Winks,—although he went and got engaged, as a sort of protection against the charms of the fair Polly and the wiles of her

astute mamma,—has never had pluck enough to go and tell them what he has been and gone and done ; at least, he had pluck enough to go, but, poor little chap, he hadn't pluck enough enough to tell them when he got there ; and as for all us, why"—laughing yet more—"it has been the object and business of our lives to keep it from her."

"Pray, was that why you never told us a word about it ?" demanded Madge.

Orford nodded.

"Yes. By-the-bye, how did you come to hear ?"

"My dear boy," cried Mrs. Trafford, "with Colonel Coles in the Town, need you ask ?"

"No, I suppose not. But I put him up to it as soon as I remembered his proclivity for doing 'Town-crier.' I suppose he had already told you, though the old sinner swore he didn't happen to have breathed it to a soul."

"I wonder what Mrs. Antrobus will do now ?" put in Madge. "Lord Charterhouse has really been so dreadfully intimate with the River House."

"Cut him, I should think," suggested Laura.

"Not she," cried Mrs. Trafford. "If Lord Charterhouse has not said a word about it, she will lay the flattering unction to her soul that he has been drawn into his engagement with Lady Nell, and that his inclinations lie with the fair Polly. That being so, she will argue in her most creamy tones that marriage is a *very serious* matter, a knot tied for *life* ; that marriages are made in Heaven, and should never be entered into without real trust and

love on either side. And so, she will help and encourage poor little Lord Charterhouse to escape from the meshes of the net which his fine, fashionable cousin has thrown around him for the sake only for his title and not at all for himself, and to follow whither the dictates of his good and affectionate heart lead him,—that is, to make her the mother-in-law of Lord Charterhouse. I think that will be about Mrs. Antrobus's next move."

"I wonder if she will manage it?" said Mrs. Farquhar, in a musing tone.

"Likely enough," replied Mrs. Trafford with a lofty air which argued no great things for her opinion of Lord Charterhouse.

"And if she does," struck in Orford, "I, for one, shall not grudge her the victory. I felt when Mr. Winks first let out that he had been there and hadn't told them, that if the old lady got the better of him after all, why, she would thoroughly deserve the honour of being his mother-in-law; that he would equally deserve being taken in, and Lady Nell be equally lucky in getting rid of a sweetheart who hadn't moral courage enough to stick to her; and so I did everything I could to give Mrs. Antrobus a fair field and no favour."

"I'm sorry I told her," said Mrs. Trafford, "which just shows you, my dear Marcus, how foolish it is to work entirely in the dark. If you had taken us into your confidence, I should not have upset your plans, as I did this afternoon."

"Oh! it doesn't really matter," he answered, with

a gay and easy laugh. "By-the-bye, did I tell you I saw your friend, Mr. Vyvyan, in the High Street this afternoon?"

"Yes, you did."

"He's been away, you know—came back this morning—been to Town to see his lawyer. I thought he looked awfully seedy."

"Really? Ill?"

"Yes, seemed to have a heavy cold upon him; voice hoarse, eyes heavy; complained of sore throat, said he had never felt worse in his life, that he could remember. 'Pon my word, I quite pitied the poor d—er—that is, the poor chap."

"Really, I am sorry to hear it. It's to be hoped he won't have an illness—it must be so wretched to be ill at an hotel," said Mrs. Trafford.

"Oh! wretched," cried Georgie.

"Can't imagine anything worse," from Julia.

"Except being ill in barracks," put in Laura, who hadn't seen Staunton for days and imagined he must be ill, though she did not like to put the question to Orford outright.

"Oh, there you're quite out of it," Orford declared; "a fellow who goes sick in barracks gots as decent a time as most men, for all the other fellows come and sit with him, and the doctor looks in three or four times a day, and altogether he does very fairly. I remember, though, being sick once when it was an awful nuisance. I had entered a horse to run in a steeple-chase open to the army, and of course, wanted to ride him. Well, I had to train no end

to get my weight down and somehow or other—perhaps the Turkish baths had been too much for me—I got a fearful cold on the top of the training. Three days before the race I had to send for the doctor, who said I was going to have rheumatic fever or inflammation of the lungs, or something, and ordered me to stop in bed. ‘I suppose I shall be all right by Thursday, Devenish?’ said I between my groans.

“‘Oh, no, you won’t,’ said he, ‘you’ve carried your training too far this time, and in bed you’ll have to stop for the next fortnight—the next three months if you run any risk.’

“‘But I must go to the races,’ I said blankly.

“‘You’ll do nothing of the kind,’ he said positively, ‘you’ll stay where you are and be rolled in linseed poultices.’

“‘But hang it all, Devenish,—I began, by way of remonstrance; but he was a peppery old person was Devenish, and cut me as short as you please.

“‘Just listen to me,’ he said, ‘you’re going to no races this side of April—it was the 1st of March, that day—so don’t try to argue the matter out with me, youngster, for I won’t have it. By George,’ he wound up, getting into a regular fume at my presuming to contradict his fiat even in desire, ‘if you say another word I’ll send for a stretcher and have you carried over to the hospital, and stick a double guard over you, and I wonder how you’d like that?’ he ended, positively chuckling over the idea of having me in his own pet particular prison.

“ Well, I shouldn’t have liked it at all, so I said, ‘ Very well, Devenish, I didn’t know I was so bad as that,’ and quietly accepted the situation.

“ ‘ Didn’t know you were so bad ! ’ he gobbled out, ‘ why, bless me, lad, don’t you *feel* bad ? ’

“ Of course I had to admit that I *did* feel bad, and so I did, no mistake about it ; but all the same I didn’t, any the more on that account, want to give up seeing my horse run for the biggest thing of that year ; though how to bring the old duffer to hear reason, I didn’t know.

“ Well, a couple of days went by, and instead of getting better, I got worse. Heavens ! how I suffered those two days.”

He stopped in his story for a moment, for at this point he caught the tender gaze of his sweet-heart’s beautiful sympathetic eyes, and knew that her gentle heart was aching now for the pain he had borne five years ago ; so of course he was obliged to pause and send an answering glance at her, to show he recognised and appreciated to the full her tenderness and care for him.

“ So you had to give up your race ? ” said Laura, who was growing more interested than she usually had been in desultory conversations since she and Sir Anthony had slipped apart.

“ Oh ! no, I didn’t. I fully meant to go, but didn’t see how to manage it. However, the afternoon before the race came off, Staunton, who had the next room to mine, came in on his way to some tea-fight or other.”

“‘ Do anything for you, old chap ?’ said he, and, as you may imagine, I just jumped at the chance his help could give me.”

“ Yes ?” Laura was beginning to get intensely interested in the story now, and leaned forward the better to catch his words.

“‘ Do anything, old chap ?’ said I, ‘ why I should think you rather can. Look here, it’s out of the question my riding Lovelace to-morrow, for old Devenish won’t let me out of this ; but, all the same, I don’t see why I shouldn’t go on the quiet, just to see the race, you know.’

“‘ No, to be sure not—if it won’t do you any harm, that is.’

“‘ Not a bit in the world,’ said I, and I give you my word I was so horribly ill at that moment, I could scarcely get my breath for pain. But, though they say there’s no fool like an *old* fool, I think there’s no fool on earth like a young one ; and like the young idiot I was, I’d have gone to that race, if by hook or by crook I could get there, if my life itself paid the forfeit. So I was only too glad to make use of Staunton, who’s just the best-natured fellow in all the world, and will do anything for anybody. So I asked him if he would go to a parson I knew in the town—an uncommonly good chap—and tell him I wanted to go to the races next day, but couldn’t because I couldn’t get leave, and ask him if he’d lend me a clerical rig-out.

“ Of course Staunton promised and brought

the whole concern back in a Gladstone bag for me. And the next day I waited till the fellows had all gone, Staunton among them. Just at the last minute, whilst the break was waiting in front of the mess, old Devenish hustled in to see me.

“‘Now, Orford,’ said he, ‘just for a last look at you before we’re off. H’m—poultices on? Er—all right. If the pain continues,’ he said to my servant, ‘you’d better add a good spoonful of mustard to the linseed-meal, and be sure Mr. Orford doesn’t get the least chill or be left a moment uncovered when you change the poultices. And keep up your spirit, Orford,’ said he to me, ‘and don’t think anything more about the races; we’ll tell you all about it when we come back,’ and then off the old sinner hustled again, thinking he had condemned me to solitary confinement until he came back again.

“However, we just waited until the break was clear of the gates, and then I jumped out of bed—pulled off my poultices—dressed myself in my parson’s rig-out, with a great fair beard and a fair, longish, curly wig—both of which I happened to have by me—and put a *pince-nez* on my nose. I give you my word of honour, not one of you would have known me. I looked in the glass and didn’t know myself. My man had got a cab waiting for me, so off I went, got to the race-course just in time, saw the race and another—and then another after that. And then I bundled back and into bed

just in time to let my fellow smother me in fresh poultices and fold the parson's rig-out up and get it stowed away in the bag again. And from that day to this," Orford ended, "not a soul but Staunton, and my man and the parson, were ever a bit the wiser; and old Devenish came back and told me all about the races, while I could have laughed in his face as he told me."

"Did you win?" asked Laura.

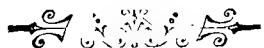
Orford shook his head.

"Not I! No; the horse was good enough, but the man who rode him was an out-and-out duffer."

"And did you take any harm?" asked Madge, as anxiously as if it had been yesterday.

"Oh, didn't I!" Orford returned with a laugh, "I tell you there's no fool like a young fool. Ill! I was laid up for weeks, until they had to send for my mother and my lord. Ill! Oh! I was ill too, and my mother came and cried over me, and my lord hum'd and haw'd, and cleared his throat and said all sorts of naughty things I shouldn't like to repeat here, just by way of proving to the people round about me that he wasn't upset like my mother, or in a mortal funk that I was going to clear out and let the old name sink into oblivion. And Staunton used to come in and sit by me whenever he could, and look at me with such self-reproach in his eyes that I couldn't help laughing, though I was much too far gone to speak. Oh! yes, I paid dearly for my whistle that time, Heaven knows," he ended.

“Please, dear Marcus,” said Madge, afterwards, when they had risen from the table and he had wandered after her into the boudoir. “Don’t buy any more whistles at that price, will you?” and for answer Orford caught her in his arms and kissed her.



CHAPTER XIV.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS.

“Snobs in high places assume great airs, and are pretentious in all they do; and the higher their elevation the more conspicuous is the incongruity of their position.

—SMILES.

How shall I attempt to describe Mrs. Hugh’s feelings when Mrs. Trafford blandly informed her, not as a piece of news, not as anything astonishing, but simply in a tone which conveyed it as a fact known to all the world, that Lord Charterhouse was going to marry his cousin Lady Nell Temple?

Well, I admit it is not an easy task, and to any-one knowing Mrs. Hugh less thoroughly than I do, it would be an impossible one to achieve. But happily for the reader who is interested in Mrs. Hugh Antrobus and the fortunes of her family, I know the good lady well—know every line of face and form, and every gesture, every accent of her oily voice, every turn of her far-seeing and astute, but nevertheless, her at times mistaken soul.

Let me then put her feelings in the simplest possible language.

She was thunderstruck—*thunderstruck!*

For a moment she grew faint and sick, her head reeled, her brain whirled, her soul grew weak and

heavy within her. Was this thing true? Was this the end for which she had worked? Was this the reward for which she had planned and plotted? Were all her hopes thus to be dashed to the ground? Was her pride—and oh! how she had prided herself on her belief that her beautiful favourite daughter would one day be Lady Charterhouse—thus to be brought down to the very dust? In truth, she was so astonished, so overwhelmed, that she quite forgot to pretend that it was quite old news for her and that she had known all about it for a long, long time.

“Really?” she stammered. “Are you quite sure?”

“Oh, quite sure,” replied Mrs. Trafford, with her little important air of being behind the scenes.

“It is a recent engagement?” persisted Mrs. Hugh.

“Oh, yes. Quite recent.”

“Oh, really. I had no idea of it. How *odd* that Lord Charterhouse did not tell us about it,” with a little laugh, which, considering the state of her mind, really did her great credit.

“Very odd,” said Mrs. Trafford drily.

“It does not look as if he was very proud of his engagement,” Mrs. Hugh remarked in a slighting tone.

“Not at all events proud to proclaim it,” returned Mrs. Trafford; and then she rose and said she really must be going, she had made quite a visitation, and Mrs. Antrobus would think her quite a nuisance.

So the two ladies took a really affectionate leave of one another, and parted on the most friendly terms imaginable, for Mrs. Trafford was indeed very sorry to feel she had dealt the other such a blow, as she could not help seeing her information was.

And then Mrs. Hugh sat down to think—to think! What should she do? How should she break the news to her family? How should she tell Polly?

She knew, alas, too well, from long experience, what a difference the news would make to Polly, and in Polly's every-day life. For the prospect of her becoming, ere long, Lady Charterhouse, was all that kept the little bride-elect—whose airs and graces were already quite insufferable—in a mood to show Polly anything like sisterly kindness at all. Mrs. Hugh knew but too well that did she but once hear a whisper, a hint, of Lord Charterhouse's engagement, all peace, even during the few days which must elapse before that of the wedding, would be utterly at an end.

She had been alone when Mrs. Trafford told her of it—for the “love-bird” had sidled out of the room, and Polly was not there either. Nobody came near for a long time and she still sat there alone, quite alone, thinking, plotting, planning what would be the best for her to do.

And as she sat thus, the shades of evening crept closer and closer around her, the fire, from a fierce roaring mass of blazing coals, became a silent red heart, then collapsed with a feeble attempt at a crash and fell to the bottom of the grate a

smouldering heap of live cinders, lightened here and there by a struggling jet of flame.

So long she sat—and then she rose up with a new idea and a new resolve in her heart.

She would not tell anybody a word about it. Which was exactly what Mrs. Trafford, an hour or two later, told Marcus Orford she would do.

Why should she tell them? Lord Charterhouse had carefully kept the fact a secret so far as they were concerned and, for anything she knew to the contrary, from everybody else. He was evidently not *proud* of it, and she wondered if—if—if he were not particularly fond of his cousin? Perhaps it had been a family affair, arranged for him years ago by his relations! Perhaps—and indeed there was nothing at all unlikely about it—perhaps he did not care for his cousin at all, and meant to throw the engagement over if he succeeded in winning Polly.

“I will not say a word about it,” said she to herself, “not even to Hugh—least of all to Polly. Even if nothing else comes of it, it serves to keep To-To quiet; and really the child does give herself terrible airs, and is so very much inclined to crow over Polly, though she ought to remember that if Polly had taken advantage of *her* first offer, she would have been poor Eliot Cardella’s widow now. Ah! well, well, it was a great blessing nothing further ever came of that,” and Mrs. Hugh gave a pious sigh of thankfulness for past mercies, which was really quite patronizing to the Providence which had ordered them.

So Mrs. Hugh rose up and girded herself with her own blandness, so to speak, and went out to do battle against poor absent, unsuspecting Lady Nell, who did not know she had an enemy in all the wide world, least of all one she had never even heard of, who loved “dear old Charterhouse” with a life-long, wholesome, hearty love, wrote to him twice or even three times in a week, and thought it an awful shame the poor dear boy couldn’t get more leave, little thinking that there was a fair Polly down at Blankhampton whose eyes had altogether prevented him from asking for it.

Happily no other ill wind blew the news in the direction of the River House, and Mrs. Hugh kept bravely on her way, making pleasant little entertainments for Lord Charterhouse, for which the approaching wedding served as an excellent excuse.

And Polly dreamed the days away, trailing her soft draperies to and fro over the polished floors—they had lovely floors all over the River House—and fancied she was “my lady,” and safe in an atmosphere of rank and fashion for ever. Poor Polly! Poor Polly! So fair, so beautiful, with her yellow hair and her peach-bloom lovely skin, so gentle and good-tempered, even if a trifle aimless and spiritless.

And Fate was stealing fast upon her, a fate that there was no resisting, because it was hers—so fast—so fast. Poor Polly! Poor Polly!

Little Mr. Winks, on his side, still found himself drawn towards the River House and went there

more frequently than ever, and Marcus Orford, who, as were several other of his brother officers, was closely watching his movements, carried to Mrs. Trafford the news that certainly Mrs. Antrobus had done as she had predicted and had kept her information concerning Lord Charterhouse to herself.

“I can’t tell what the little chap is driving at,” Orford ended.

He repeated the same that evening to Staunton as they sat together over their last pipe before turning in, and he said it with such a puzzled air of utter perplexity that Staunton burst out laughing.

“It’s easy enough to understand,” he returned. “It’s a jolly enough house, I’ve no doubt, and they make an awful lot of him, and after all, the girls are as pretty, if not prettier, than any other girls in the whole town. ‘Pon my word, I can’t see your difficulty in understanding the whole affair. The only difficulty I have in understanding him is to know why on earth he went and engaged himself to Lady Nell.”

“Felt himself getting spoons on Polly and wanted to put himself under lock and key,” suggested Orford,

“More than likely. And he has always been fond of Lady Nell in his way,” said Staunton, “he told me so. After all, poor little chap, it isn’t altogether his fault if his way is a shade lukewarm.”

“No—true—true,” agreed Orford.

And then they fell to talking of other things,

Staunton trying his best to lead their conversation up to a certain point, a point from whence he could, so to speak, peep into the doings of the family at No. 7, St. Eve's—so that neither of them gave further heed to the, to them, incomprehensible and even mysterious conduct of Mr. Winks. But though between them they had hit very near to the truth, yet neither had guessed or, for the matter of that, could have believed it had the other guessed it, how great a struggle and tumult was, even then, going on in Mr. Winks' breast. In truth, he had never known such a struggle there before.

He had always been, as he said, fond of his cousin Lady Nell; he had always looked forward to marrying her some day, to going through the regular routine at her side—wedding march—breakfast—journey—honeymoon—home-coming—tenantry—presents—speeches—and a long and happy life together. A little soldiering, just till Nell got sick of it, a little yachting, and a great deal of hunting, shooting, visiting and the rest.

But, somehow, since he had been up to Town and had set a train which would surely and in due time light all these good things into reality, and had, quite in a glow of passion, bought Lady Nell an engagement ring and spent two blissful days at her side, a change had crept over him; he found himself often and often comparing Lady Nell with Polly Antrobus, and, unfortunately, not to the advantage of his *fiancée*. She was so boisterous, so strong and sturdy, she was such a fine, swaggering, take-care-

of-herself girl—more likely to take care of him than to let him take care of her. And she persisted in wearing strong lace-up boots with thick soles, quite short cloth skirts, cut by the best tailors in the world it is true—Oh! pray let me beg her ladyship's pardon—*built*, yes *built* by a first-rate tailor, and I rather think that she was so very particular about this same building process, that she swore by Redfern (of Cowes)—she was very careful to tell you she chiefly had dealings with that branch of the firm—for serge, by Dorè for cloth gowns, and by Fisher for coats. I have heard a whisper that she took so little interest in more feminine costumes, as for drawing-rooms and balls, that she left the choice of maker and dress alike to her mother, who had a weakness for Russell and Allen, and invariably chose the most *spirituelle* and delicate garments possible for her. Still, though Lady Nell was an exquisite and unwearied waltzer, always in perfect training, and at the end of a ball, as light as a feather and as fresh as a daisy, it did not avail her greatly with Mr. Winks, who had not seen her in many ball-rooms, and, for himself, infinitely preferred a shady fernery or poky little balcony closed in by bunting and transformed into a temporary paradise by the late ferns and a Chinese lantern, wherein he could sit with—well, not a boisterous, restless Lady Nell, who didn't care if she chaffed his very heart out, and would rather that they should discuss the state of her horse's heels than his affections, but a congenial soul who could look pleased at nothing—a soft

nothing, I mean—to the best polished floor that ever couple trod a measure on.

And from beginning to think Lady Nell boisterous and restless, with other little deficiencies of appearance and manner, he began to compare her to Polly, who was placid and gentle and dignified, and—and—would as soon have thought of chaffing *him* as of chaffing the dear Dean or the spiritual lord of Blankhampton himself.

To be sure there were drawbacks connected with Polly's surroundings. Mrs. Antrobus was effusive to a degree, and To-To was a pert little minx who seemed to think that because she was just on the eve of marrying, she had the whole world at her feet; as for the bridegroom-elect he was a horror, simply a horror. But then, Mr. Winks didn't know that he made much difference to Polly, who detested him and would certainly make a point of seeing him as little as was possible when once she was married, particularly if she married "to better herself," as the phrase goes. And if the festive Herrick was tabooed, why pert Miss To-To would have very little encouragement to visit her sister much, and really as regarded Mrs. Antrobus herself, Mr. Winks could not see that she was any more objectionable than his aunt, Lady Temple-Bar, who was everlastingly girding at Nell for the boyish cut of her garments and for not taking better care of her complexion.

And undoubtedly she was very kind !

"You'll come in *good* time to-morrow, Lord

Charterhouse, won't you?" she said coaxingly, as he took leave after dining with them the night before the wedding-day.

"Oh, yes! Mrs. Antrobus, frightfully early," he answered.

"I shall depend upon you, remember."

"All right. I shall have to come early, you know," he assured her, "on account of the bouquets."

"Oh! yes, I forgot them. You think they will come in time?" she enquired anxiously.

"Oh, yes, one of my fellows starts at seven o'clock with them."

For Lord Charterhouse was presenting the bridesmaids with their bouquets for the occasion—ten of them—he having been only too anxious to have the honour of providing the fair Polly with the finishing touch to her toilette from his own place. On the whole his desires came in very opportunely, for the festive Herrick, quietly ignoring the fact that a gay and gallant bridegroom usually gives his bride's attendants some token by which to keep the occasion in remembrance, and supplements the gift by a bouquet of choice flowers,—emblematic perhaps of the fair bevy of which his bride is the centre flower—had pointedly aired his intention of ordering To-To's flowers from Covent Garden himself—"an exquisite bouquet and *real* orange-blossoms," as poor Mrs. Hugh, trying to make the most of it, told everybody.

"Mean spindle-legged hound," said Mr. Winks

in a blaze of indignation to himself when he heard of it. So he was to have the honour of giving Polly her bouquet, and as his was a lavish and generous nature, he supplemented the gift with an offer to Mrs. Hugh of a hamper of cut flowers for the breakfast-table.

“So different,” sighed Mrs. Hugh to Polly, as they turned the great flat hampers of fresh and costly blossoms out the following morning, filling trays and vases and dishes and bowls until the whole place looked like fairy-land, “so open-hearted and generous, Polly.”

“Yes,” said Polly, putting the last touches to an *epergne* for the centre of the table—then asked in her quiet way, “What time are To-To’s flowers coming?”

“I really do not know, dear,” replied Mrs. Hugh, who was abstractedly gazing down the long table, seeing it in her mind’s eye spread for Polly’s bridal feast.

Now Polly had a very fair head-piece where the details of dress or decoration were concerned, so when she had finished the table to her satisfaction and her mother’s proud delight, she went in search of To-To and put the question to her which she had just put to her mother.

“To-To, what time do your flowers come? Will Herrick send them up or will someone have to go down to the Station for them?”

To-To, who was struggling with her hair, which somehow would not arrange itself to her liking,

turned round from the dressing-glass and faced her sister.

“I don’t know, Polly. Herrick said he would order them to come down from Town in time. I forgot to ask him last night.”

“I had better see if Cecil can go down to the hotel,” said Polly.

She went off to the morning-room, where she found her brother Cecil just enjoying his morning cigarette.

“Cis,” she said. “To-To’s flowers haven’t come, would you mind going down and looking after them? She is dressing now—there’s not a moment to spare.”

“All right,” said he willingly, “all the same that fellow Brentham might have arranged to have them sent up.”

“Yes,” said Polly, in disgusted tones. “But you’ll go at once, won’t you, Cis?”

“Yes, at once.”

“There’s a good boy.”

Cis did go off at once—found the festive Herrick, with a fine air upon him of not being the least bit put out of the way by the event of the day, playing a very bad game at billiards with a man staying in the hotel. Cis, being but a raw youth, blurted out the nature of his errand without ceremony.

“I say, Brentham, what about To-To’s flowers? They’re waiting for them now? What time are they coming?”

The festive Herrick's jaw fell like blank death !
He had forgotten all about them !

“Forgotten them,” Cis exclaimed bluntly. “Why man, how on earth *could* you forget them? You went up to Town on purpose or next door to it.”

“Awf’ly sorry, forgot all about ‘em,” exclaimed Herrick, trying to carry his omission off with a little extra swagger.

“Well, I’d better go back,” said Cis, with a disgust fully equal to his sister Polly’s.

So back he went, as fast as horse and cab could take him, to find To-To, already dressed in her bridal white finery, bewailing the non-appearance of the *real* orange blossoms which, poor child, were to prove to all her world what a devoted lover and husband she was taking unto herself.



CHAPTER XV.

“A MAKE-SHIFT.”

“Youth and beauty, set off with sweetness and virtue, capacity and discretion—what have they not accomplished!”

—FORDYCE.

As might have been expected, when To-To was made aware that her faithful Herrick had actually forgotton the much talked-of and all-important orange-blossoms, she went off into a paroxysm of hysterical grief such as threatened to put all thoughts of a wedding at an end for that day. What should she do? She couldn't be married without a wreath, she declared, and after all that had been said about it, she could not possibly be married in a wreath of *artificial* flowers, even if she had time to get such a thing from the town, which she had not. So what should she, what could she do?

Happily Polly, whose talents lay all in a decorative direction, came to the rescue with a good, even a brilliant suggestion.

“Lord Charterhouse has sent enough flowers for twenty brides,” she exclaimed, “and a huge bouquet for each bridesmaid. There's a heap of stephanotis left over and enough loose flowers besides to make a pretty bouquet for Baby. It isn't as if Baby was grown up. Nobody will expect her to have a big bouquet, any more than a long frock.”

To-To shot a grateful glance at her elder sister. "Oh ! Polly, you are a dear," she cried. "It's a lovely suggestion—lovely. Run and fetch the loose flowers up, Cis, there's a good boy," and To-To turned with a brilliant smile to the glass and tried to remove the traces of the storm of tears which had possessed her a few moments before. "It won't make any difference to Baby," she continued, with charming candour and regardless of the fact that poor Baby was standing by looking as if she was threatened with utter extinction—"nobody will look at her, you know."

"Oh ! yes, they will," broke in poor Baby, breathlessly.

"Yes—yes—dear, of course," murmured Polly in soothing accents. "Now To-To, here they are. Just pin the stephanotis in with the masses of your hair like a coronet. Oh ! it looks lovely."

"How delighted he will be," cried To-To simpering at herself in the glass.

"Yes, and very thankful to be got so well out of a scrape, I should think," returned Polly sharply.

"Oh ! I meant Lord Charterhouse," said To-To with ineffable conceit.

Polly collapsed into the silence of unutterable disgust, and gave her undivided attention to the construction of Baby's posy ; she felt it was useless to argue such a point with the heroine of the day.

They reached the church without further accident, finding—well, let us say *Blankhampton* for the sake of concise description of the congregation

assembled there; and there was Herrick looking horribly nervous and weaker about the knees than ever, like a London cab horse on its last legs.

The ceremony began! And it proceeded, as such ceremonies do. Nobody cried except Mrs. Hugh, who felt obliged to get up a small exhibition of motherly grief and sniffled a little behind a podgy hand covered by a lavender glove a size too large for it, while she vainly tried to find an unknown pocket in her new dress with the other.

It happened that Polly was kneeling gracefully in front of her mother and hearing the piteous little smothered sniffle, she turned round—for, as I have said elsewhere, Polly was a good and affectionate girl and looked after her mother's welfare more than all Mrs. Hugh's other children put together—saw her mother's ill-gloved hand vainly groping for her pocket and imagining her search to be in quest of her smelling-bottle, opened her own—a handsome thing given her by Lord Charterhouse and re-filled with the strongest of smelling-salts two days previously—and taking the stopper out, held it close under her mother's nose.

The effect, although in obedience to law, was unfortunate.

Mrs. Hugh had no opportunity of saying or even of *looking* anything reproachful. For the rest of the ceremony she choked, sneezed, gasped and coughed, as if she had suddenly been filled with gas and was in danger of bursting.

And then when all was over and Herrick

Brentham and To-To were man and wife, she went with a purple face and streaming eyes into the vestry to sign the registers ; Polly followed unob-servant and serene, her face lighted with the reflec-tion of a good conscience : she felt that she had done her duty. I am bound to say that there were some persons present—Orford, who, with the three Traf-ford girls, Staunton and Brookes, occupied a front pew and had an excellent view all the time—who enjoyed the little scene thoroughly and went off into wild struggles of suppressed laughter. As Madge, who had tried her best to frown him into more proper behaviour, said afterwards—“It was really scandalous.”

So, with the little after-fuss of breakfast, of health-drinking, of complimentary speeches and of parting, To-To Antrobus went out of the place of her birth, to fight the world under another name and under a new protectorate ! And—as she and Herrick had not been able to make up their minds as to which of the many extensive, distinguished and costly tours they had planned out should be adopted for their honeymoon trip—they went first, as a preliminary canter, to London to spend a fortnight dining at the Criterion and doing the round of the theatres.

Sic transit gloria mundi !

Which was what Orford said when he heard of it !

The day following the wedding was that on which Lord and Lady Ceespring were to reach Blank-hampton in order that they might make the acquaintance of their son's *fiancée*. Consequently

the house in St. Eve's was in a flutter of expectation and excitement from roof to cellar, for Mrs. Trafford was most anxious that her niece should make the most favourable impression possible, nor was she unmindful of the difference it might make to her future happiness if her relatives happened to strike the old lord—of whom and of whose eccentricity she had heard all manner of the most extraordinary stories—in an unpleasant light.

So when Madge and Laura went with Orford to the station to meet the august couple, both were dressed with as much care as if the wedding-day itself had come.

And Madge looked lovely!

The old lord,—who was in a betwixt-and-between kind of mood, hardly knowing whether to be grave or gay, crusty or, as he could be when he chose, the very pink of politeness,—happened to look first at Laura as the train drew up alongside of the platform.

“Good God, my lady,” he exclaimed testily. “The lad must be a fool to throw himself away on a pretty little doll like that,” and then his keen old eyes, gray like his son’s, fell upon Madge, who was standing on Marcus Orford’s other hand—and, as I said, Madge looked lovely.

“Which is it, my lady?” Lord Ceespring enquired in a dubious tone.

“The one with the fur cape,” returned Lady Ceespring in a tone of decision.

“H’m!” with another look at Madge—“H’m—

ah!—that's different. Ah! the lad's a chip of the old block—a chip of the old block. I always felt myself competent to pick out the prettiest girl wherever I went—and, by Jove," he added, as the train finally came to a standstill—"I got the pick of the garden when I went to gather orange blossoms."

Lady Ceespring, who even now that she was the mother of six feet of handsome manhood, was scarcely less lovely than she had been on her wedding-day, blushed and smiled at the compliment, for she loved her choleric old lord tenderly. The next moment Marcus Orford wrenched open the door and jumped into the carriage.

"My dear mother," with a hearty kiss and a great hug. "Why, Pater, you look younger than ever," grasping the old lord's hand and shaking it vigorously. "Now, here she is."

"Which?" enquired Lord Ceespring, struggling to free his hand—still tender from his recent attack of gout—from his son's grasp.

Marcus Orford cast a look of reproach at his father, as if to say—"Need you ask?" then took his sweetheart's hand and laid it in his mother's without a word.

"And you are going to be my son's wife?" said lovely Lady Ceespring graciously. "I am sure you will make him very happy. It was very good of you to come to meet us."

"I was only too glad to come," returned Madge, lifting her beautiful shy eyes to her future mother-in-law's charming face. She had heard a great deal

about mothers-in-law, and had even gone so far, although she knew from Marcus that Lady Ceespring was very beautiful, as to try to picture the dread gorgon who would rule her life or know the reason why. But now, in one instant, in that one brief glance, all her doubts and fears had melted utterly away, and from that moment she felt herself one of a new family.

“This is my cousin Laura,” she said, drawing Laura forward.

“Miss Laura Trafford ?” enquired Lady Ceespring as she took her hand.

“Yes, Laura Trafford,” said Laura, giving the old lord one of her most coquettish glances.

Now the old lord was one of that sort of old gentlemen who cannot resist the flattery of a coquettish glance, and he returned Laura’s look with interest. By that time his man and my lady’s maid and a tall solemn-looking footman had come and were arranging all the august couple’s belongings, which were scattered from one end of the carriage to the other; and as Madge and Orford were both busy talking to Lady Ceespring, the old lord promptly devoted himself to Laura.

“No use standing here in the way, and in the draught, is there ?” he suggested blandly, and with a fetching look.

“Not at all. Shall we be going towards your carriage ?” for Marcus had accepted the loan of Mrs. Farquhar’s cosy little brougham and it was awaiting them in the portico of the station.

So Lord Ceespring and Laura sauntered quietly towards the entrance, to Marcus Orford's infinite amusement, though how his father could waste a look on Laura when Madge was by, passed his comprehension.

However, they followed in their wake, and then Lady Ceespring got into the carriage and made room for Madge beside her.

"You are coming with us?" she said, as the girl drew back for Lord Ceespring to enter the carriage.

"Oh! no—Marcus is going with you. We have a cab here and must go straight home. I am sure you will like to be quiet for an hour or so before dinner, and my aunt is expecting us."

"Oh! we dine with you this evening, do we not?" Lady Ceespring said.

"Yes. I am sure you must need a rest."

"I am a little tired. Then Marcus will see you into your cab. You are *quite* sure—" playfully—that you can spare him?"

A brilliant smile flashed over Madge's face and lighted up her beautiful dusky eyes.

"Oh! yes, indeed," showing her white teeth as she laughed merrily. "Then good-bye for the present."

"Let me," said Lord Ceespring gallantly—he was still the gallant Cecil Orford, who, forty years before, had won his sovereign's favour as the finest-mannered gentleman about her court.

He uncovered his handsome white curly head as

the cab moved away, and Laura caught her cousin's hand in rapturous congratulation.

"Oh! Madge! you lucky, lucky girl," she cried. "What a dear charming old man—no wonder Marcus is such a love as he is."

"What a dear, beautiful, charming mother-in-law," cried Madge.

"Oh! I never looked at her," cried Laura, with delightful candour.

"Oh! Laura! How could you be near her and not revel in her beauty and her exquisite grace?"

"Time enough," returned Laura coolly. "I was quite enough taken up with Lord Ceespring. He is worth looking at if you like. And such lovely, old-school courtly manners—one expected to see him with lace ruffles and a snuff-box."

"Had he lace-ruffles?" asked Madge absently, still thinking of her lovely ladyship.

"*Madge!*" cried Laura.

Madge looked up in a fright.

"What is it, Laura?" she asked, in a scared tone.

"What is it? Had he a lace-ruffle? Wake up, my dear, for your wits are wool-gathering, and prepare to receive artillery, for here we are at home, so expect a hundred thousand questions,"—and then the cab drew up with a jerk at No. 7, St. Eve's.

Meantime, Marcus Orford was driving along opposite to his father and mother.

"What do you think of her?" he asked.

“She will do,” returned the old earl, with a nod of his handsome old head.

“Which of them?” enquired his son grinning.

“Your one,” replied Lord Ceespring promptly. “Oh! the other one is a bright little thing enough, and I daresay very good fun and so on—but she wouldn’t have done for your wife at all—not at all. A pretty little thing enough but empty-headed as a doll.”

A nice verdict, surely, for “a dear, handsome, old man with the courtly manners of the old school,” to pass upon so ardent an admirer!

Empty-headed as a doll! Oh! the pity of it.



CHAPTER XVI.

▲ PROMISE FULFILLED.

“If you would fall into any extreme, let it be on the side of gentleness. The human mind is so constructed that it resists vigour, and yields to softness.”

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES.

THE dinner party “to meet Lord and Lady Ceespring,” had been the subject of much thought and discussion, but when Mrs. Trafford was dressed in her nice black silk dinner-gown, with its pretty trimmings of lace and jet, and a charming arrangement of the throat and sleeves so that neck and arms showed through the open-work, and was standing on the hearth-rug in her cosy drawing-room armed with a huge black fan all steel spangles and a huge fluffy mass of feathers at the end thereof, she felt that her pains had not been wasted, but that a perfect success awaited her.

One after another her brood came down—the two girls, Julia and Laura, looking remarkably well in pale blue soft silk gowns, cut to show their neck and arms which—as in their mother’s case—were white and well-covered. Then Madge in a yellowish gauze-like frock, soft and fluffy as the feathers on her aunt’s fan, wearing no ornament excepting a string of large amber beads around her throat, the round and slender throat which her

father had put on the canvas of many and many a pot-boiler in the days that were gone by. And if Madge had looked lovely in the afternoon, why she looked lovelier and loveliest in the evening, with the rich brown of her hair glowing in the lamp-light and her great velvet-like eyes shining out from her pure cream-tinted face.

Mrs. Trafford eyed her up and down with an approving but intensely critical gaze.

“Very charming, dear,” she said, nodding and smiling.

The pure cream of Madge’s face was flooded with crimson instantly and her eyes filled with a sudden glad light, which might have been mistaken for tears, and, in fact, was very near them. Happily she was relieved from doing more than smiling and touching her aunt’s hand by the entrance of Orford and Colonel Urquhart, who by-the-bye was dining with Mrs. Trafford for the first time since his—his *refusal*; although, of course he had been in her house on Mrs. Farquhar’s account several times. Mrs. Trafford, conscious of the difference in her standing since she had last entertained him, went to meet them with some little condescension in her manner. She was not unconscious, perhaps, that she was looking remarkably well that night, more like the elder sister of her girls, and, with a little curling white ostrich feather in place of the usual coquettish cap, supplemented by a crescent brooch of paste so good as to be almost as brilliant as diamonds, placed carelessly among the ropes and

coils of hair which surmounted her head, quite the plump little woman to whom *any* man might take a fancy. Anyway, with a flutter at her heart but showing a brave and smiling front, she went forward and held out her hand to him.

“So glad to see you,” she murmured. “How d’ do again, Marcus?”—and then Mrs. Farquhar came in, dressed all in primrose-coloured brocade and looking, though lovely, as if she was not quite sure whether somebody or other would not turn upon her and literally rend her limb from limb.

“Just in time, Georgie,” Mrs. Trafford said, “Colonel Urquhart and Marcus have just come,”—then her eyes fell upon Marcus Orford’s right hand, and she exclaimed, “Marcus, my dear boy, have you hurt your hand?”

Orford looked down at his bruised and discoloured hand, the back of which was adorned with several strips of that particular kind of plaster which is called “gold-beaters’-skin,” and fenced the question:

“Oh! I—I—er—got it damaged a bit, Mrs. Traff’—” he said, somewhat confusedly. “It’s nothing much really—not worth wasting pity over.”

“How did you do it?” Mrs. Trafford persisted,

“I—oh!—I—I hit it against something,” he stammered, giving his explanation at last all in a hurry, as if he had suddenly thought of it.

At this point Colonel Urquhart burst out aughing.

“What was it, Colonel Urquhart?” asked Mrs. Trafford, appealing to him in just the old “plump little woman” style.

Urquhart looked at Orford as if asking leave to enlighten the lady of the house who looked, what she in truth was, simply bursting with curiosity. Orford discreetly occupied himself by admiring his sweetheart and whispering to her how exquisitely lovely she was.

“Do tell me,” pleaded Mrs. Trafford, laying her fan on his arm.

“Well—I’m going to peach, old fellow,” said the Colonel to Orford, who shrugged his shoulders and looked rather shame-faced. “The fact is, Mrs. Trafford, Orford came into the club about an hour ago and just in time to hear that little toad, Graham, say something very objectionable—so Orford took him outside and pommelled him. He *has* barked his knuckles a bit, certainly, but they’re a mere nothing to Graham’s face. He won’t be able to show for a week.”

“About me?” cried poor little Georgie, beginning to tremble and growing so ghastly white that tall Madge put a protecting arm about her—“Was it about me?”

“Well, it was,” admitted Urquhart.

“Oh! Captain Orford, why did you do it? Why did you do it? she wailed. “The very day your father and mother get here—What will they say to me? Oh, Mrs. Trafford, do excuse me from joining you this evening.”

“My dear, if the man said so much as a single word against you, Marcus or any other man of honour,”—with a glance at Urquhart—“had no alternative—”

“Certainly not,” broke in Urquhart—“If Orford hadn’t been there, I, for one, should have had a reckoning with him.”

“But Lord Ceespring,”—faltered Georgie miserably,

“Lord Ceespring would not wish Marcus to take any other course I’m sure.”

“Ah’ you don’t know Lord Ceespring,” returned Mrs. Farquhar with meaning—“I do. And if he doesn’t happen to take it right—Oh, Mrs. Trafford, do let me dine alone to-night.”

But the appeal came too late, the door opened and the smart waiter borrowed for the occasion from the club, announced—“Lord and Lady Ceespring.”

There was a general stir, and although Lady Ceespring was radiant in blue velvet and diamonds, it was the old lord who made his presence the most felt. He met Mrs. Trafford and her daughters with the courtly air of pleasant dignity which no one knew better than he how to assume—then went across the room to poor shrinking Georgie Farquhar, whose face was ashen grey with fear and nervousness, and taking her hand with a fine air of reverence, raised it to his lips.

“I have never been ashamed of my son, my dear,” he said, “but I have never before been so utterly proud of him as I am at this moment.”

And close behind him came lovely Lady Ceespring,

who was not a clever woman, yet who managed somehow always to hit on the right thing to say or do at a critical moment, who just took her in her arms and kissed her without a word.

“I don’t know what *you* think about it, Marcus,” said Mrs. Trafford audibly to Orford, in a tone which she tried hard to make light and gay, but which betrayed her real feeling by the sob which rose in her throat, “but you ought to be very proud of your father and mother.”

Orford drew himself up until he looked quite three inches taller. “God bless the dear old boy, I am,” he murmured in Mrs. Trafford’s ear.

By that time Lady Ceespring had reached the place where her future daughter-in-law was waiting to receive her, and as it was their first meeting before the social world of Blankhampton, she kissed her also.

“Oh! you darling—you darling,” whispered Madge, holding Lady Ceespring’s hand close in her own.

Lady Ceespring smiled back at her. “I am so proud of my boy, Madge,” she whispered in reply; and then her attention was claimed by Mrs. Trafford, for the Dean and Lady Margaret had come and there was an old acquaintance to be renewed, Lady Ceespring and Lady Margaret having been firm friends years and years ago before either of them had looked out upon the world at all.

Madge was watching the beautiful woman in her beautiful velvet robes, go across the room, when the

voice of Lord Ceespring recalled her to herself with a start.

“Has not my future daughter a kiss for me?” he asked, with a delightful air of meekness—“I saw you whispering to my lady—have you not a word for *me*?”

And Madge in answer, put her two hands upon his shoulders and lifted her face, as a child does, to be kissed. “I shall love you,” she said—“I know I shall love you.”



CHAPTER XVII.

TOO MUCH FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT.

“Rogues are always found out in some way. Whoever is a wolf will act as a wolf; that is the most certain of all things.”

—LA FONTAINE.

THUS were my Lord and Lady Ceespring complimented; thus were my Lord and Lady Ceespring conquered; after Madge's impulsive declaration all went merry as a marriage bell. Within a few minutes the men who made up the party arrived and presently dinner was served.

It was a great success!

The choice of dishes was admirable—everything was perfectly cooked, and the service was excellent. There was no pretentiousness about it—no, in such an instance as the present, Mrs. Trafford was far too wise a little woman to even assume a little extra “side.” All was quiet, comfortable and dainty, and everybody enjoyed the meal thoroughly, perhaps most of all, little Mrs. Farquhar, who was comforted beyond measure by the reception given her by the Ceesprings, whom she had previously known but slightly, and of whom she had stood in the utmost awe, not to say dread. But now that they had thus publicly received her with affection and absolute belief in her innocence, she knew that the whole town of Blankhampton would stand up and

do battle for her, even those who had been most impressed by the apparent truth of Mrs. Hildersley's story.

Naturally enough, both Lord Ceespring and Mrs. Trafford were burning to know the details of the row in the club, as were several officers belonging to the Black Horse, Lester Brookes, Sir Anthony Staunton, and Cunliffe, and most of all old Colonel Coles, who had been cursing himself ever since he had heard the first rumour of it, that he had not been on the spot when such a tit-bit of gossip was brewing; for Colonel Coles not only loved gossip, as dearly as children love toffee, but he loved the preparation thereof—he loved the boiling and stewing, and the tasting and trying, and all the warm and savoury odours which rise during the process of making it.

However, until the ladies had left the table, the subject was carefully tabooed—then old Lord Ceespring's curiosity could be restrained no longer.

“Damaged your knuckles, I see, Marcus,” he remarked in a casual sort of tone, as if he had not the faintest idea of the cause of the mischief.

“Yes,” said Marcus carelessly.

There was a moment's silence—on that subject, I mean,—and then the old lord began again, with a more direct attempt to get at the story of the afternoon's *fracas*.

“Er—ah!—other fellow much damaged?” he enquired, with a ludicrous attempt at indifference, such as made Urquhart at once take pity on him.

“ H’m—pretty fair,” said Orford carelessly.

“ How did you hear of it, Lord Ceespring ? ” enquired Urquhart.

“ My fellow brought in the news,” the old lord replied. “ I quite expected to see my son with two black eyes and a broken nose from what the fellow said he had heard.”

“ Oh ! he got mixed,” said Urquhart, with a laugh—“ it was the other one who came in for that sort of thing.”

“ So bad as that ? ” asked Lord Ceespring, edging a trifle nearer to Urquhart—“ Tell me all about it. Were you there ? ”

“ Oh ! yes ! It was in this way. Graham, the man you know, who is at the bottom of all the scandal about Mrs. Farquhar, has kept out of your son’s way very carefully of late, for Marcus took a vow to thrash him thoroughly if he caught him saying a word against Mrs. Farquhar.”

“ Quite right too.”

“ So I think. Well, Graham has very carefully kept out of his way, but this afternoon, finding Marcus was not in the club, he began swaggering about one thing or another and finally got, as we had all been expecting him to do all the time, on to the subject of Mrs. Farquhar—said a lot of the vilest things about her, how she had tracked him down, fairly hunted him from end of the town to the other. He didn’t actually mention her name, so we couldn’t very well take him up. But at last he said something more sneering and jibing

than ever, and one of the youngsters took him up short. ‘Who are you talking about, Graham?’ he asked. ‘Mrs. Farquhar, or Mrs. Hildersley?’

“‘Mrs. Farquhar, of course,’ sneered Graham.

“He didn’t know that Marcus was standing close behind him, having come in in time to hear almost all he had been saying about her, but as her name passed his lips, Marcus just laid hold of him by the collar and pinned him.

“He turned as yellow-white as you might expect of such an arrant little coward, and I assure you his knees fairly shook under him. However, there was no escape from the iron grip which had him by the throat, and Marcus shook him, just as a terrier shakes a rat.

“And then when he had told him he was a liar and a cad, he said—‘I’m not going to disgrace this club by thrashing you inside—but I’m going to take you outside and give you a foretaste of what you’ll get from Farquhar when he comes back, which will be in less than a week from now.’

“‘Gentlemen,’ he went on, appealing to us ‘when I wrote and told Farquhar to get home as soon as he could, I promised him I would knock any man down who dared to say a word against his wife in my presence. This little scoundrel,’ he added, with another vigorous shake of his victim—‘knew that perfectly’—and then he took Graham outside, —and I must say, Lord Ceespring, he represented Farquhar admirably.’

When Urquhart had finished his tale, the old

lord's face was simply radiant. "He is my own son," he said—"but I must go and shake hands with him, for all that."

Mrs. Trafford had planned a pleasant little reception, so when the men went up into the drawing-room they found it already well-filled, while fresh guests were coming every moment.

As Orford and his father passed in at one end of the room, Marcus perceived that Vyvyan of Stormount was lounging at the entrance to the other part of it, the part where Mrs. Trafford was standing to receive her guests.

"By-the-bye, sir," he said to the old lord—"one of the Vyvvans of Stormount is putting up in Blankhampton just now. I must introduce him to you."

"A Vyvyan of Stormount," repeated the old man—"Can't be—there isn't one living."

"Well, a son, I mean. "He's a son of Geoffrey's," Orford explained.

"Can't be. Geoffrey married one of the Rose-Guelders and had one daughter, who inherited Stormount and married Stephen St. Aubyn—lives there now. Must be some mistake."

"Perhaps. I don't like the fellow, so I didn't take much interest in his family history. But he's here to-night and I'll bring him to you presently."

"Do. Must be some mistake or other."

The father and son parted then, one in search of Mrs. Farquhar, the other in search of his sweetheart. Mrs. Farquhar was standing listening to Lady Ceespring's conversation with Lady Margaret

Adair, the Dean's wife, and Madge was in the smaller part of the double-room, not very far from where Vyvyan was lounging.

But a moment before she had spoken to him.

"I hope you are better, Mr. Vyvyan," she said.

"Thank—you, Miss Trafford," Vyvyan replied, with his usual stiff and formal manner—"I am very much better."

"You were really very ill?" She disliked the man, but he was her aunt's guest and she was gloriously happy that night.

"Very ill—I have not been out before—but I could not resist Mrs. Trafford's kind invitation," he told her.

He wondered why Madge blushed such a right royal red and smiled so divinely as she murmured some common-place and turned away. But he did not wonder long, nor yet why Mrs. Trafford was giving such a charming party, for while he stood there, old Lord Ceespring hustled into that room in search of a chair for Mrs. Farquhar, and not seeing one, looked round for some means of obtaining one. His eyes fell upon the lounging, who had moved his position a little and was then standing just within the door, and to him he spoke in the tone in which he was accustomed to address his servants.

"Charles," he said—"fetch me two chairs."

Orford, who was standing at hand, made a step forward but was stopped from speaking by Vyvyan's reply.

"Yes, m' lord," he said, stiffening himself up

with his hands glued to his side ; and Orford saw that he spoke from the force of long habit.

Nevertheless he went forward.

“ There’s some mistake, sir,” he said to his father —“ This is Mr. Vyvyan of Stormount.”

The Vyvyan looked livid with fright as the old lord roared out his reply :

“ Vyvyan of Stormount ! Why bless me boy, what are you thinking about ? It’s that villain, Charles, as bad a rascal as ever wore a footman’s plush and powder.”

Powder ! ah ! —

“ The fellow who left me for prying into my letters—went to Lord Haleworth’s and got seven years for theft,” the old lord went on, his voice getting louder and louder—and then, all at once, his fury got the better of him and he went for “ Charles,” who, seeing him coming, turned and fled precipitately.

And then, in the flash of eye-lid, there came to Marcus Orford’s mind an exact remembrance of how, when and where he had seen the face in conjunction with grey hair.

Not grey hair ! Powder.

And when he realised what had happened, when he realised all that the past meant when read in the light of the present, Orford’s astonished gravity gave way and he laughed till he was simply speechless, till he ached all over, in fact. Nor did the sight of Mrs. Trafford’s blank and then orrified face in any way help to restore composure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHADOW OF "ME."

"The world is a looking glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face. Frown on it, and it will in turn look sourly on you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly kind of companion."

—THACKERAY.

To sum up the feelings of a person, who has been thoroughly deceived and taken in, with one word is not, as a rule, an easy matter. But the many and unpleasant feelings which swayed and surged through Mrs. Trafford's breast may very fairly be described so.

She was *outraged*!

To Orford all that had puzzled him before was now as clear as daylight—the stiff and constrained manner of the so-called Vivian Vyvyan, otherwise Charles Frogg—the habit of standing in an attitude of attention with a slight stoop of his whole body and with his hands crossed before him, his way of listening thus to a lady's conversation, looking up under his eye-lashes the while—all were easy enough to account for and to understand now, for, of course, they were the usual manner of a footman, and Orford called himself a fool a dozen times over that he had not spotted the fellow for a "Jeames Yellowplush" the moment he first set

eyes upon him. I am afraid it must be owned that on the whole Marcus Orford's respect for Mr. Charles Frogg had rather increased than otherwise by the evening's revelation, even though his confidence in his own powers of observation had received an appalling shock, despite all the apologetic sophistry he could command.

"Hang it—" he said to his father—"it was such a clever trick of the dog to play. Give you my word of honour, sir, he kept up the character of a Vvyyan of Stormount from first to last with consummate skill, in fact, did the part simply to perfection—true, I said from the first that his mother must have been an out and out howler—but, for all that, he kept it up admirably, particularly when you take his origin and previous history into consideration."

"But what was the fellow's object?" asked Lord Ceespring.

"His object? Ah! that's a question. I can't say *for certain*, of course—but I fancy he had an eye to taking up his quarters here permanently."

"What one of the daughters?" exclaimed the old lord in disgust.

"No—the mother," returned Orford.

Lord Ceespring went off into a series of rapturous chuckles.

"And I came along and spoilt his game, hey? I spoilt his game for him."

Marcus Orford laughed.

"Hardly—Mrs. Traff' has a very wise little head

on her shoulders ; she knows how many beans make five as well as any one I ever met."

" But no woman is proof against the flattery—" Lord Ceespring began.

" She refused Urquhart, anyway," retorted his son—" it's no secret either. I had it from Urquhart in plain language myself."

" You don't mean it ? "

" Yes, I do though. So what possible chance would this fellow Charles have had ? "

" No—no—no. 'Pon my word boy," said Lord Ceespring, putting his hand affectionately through his son's arm—" er—by-the-bye, just get me a small brandy and soda, will you ? I'm a little upset by all this business—'Pon my word, I must congratulate you on your choice of a wife. The lady is charming and as lovely a bride as I have seen since my lady was one—and her family seem quite charming too. By George ! sir, I'd no idea such a sensible woman as Mrs. Trafford was to be found in this country. I'll go up and have a little chat with her."

So Lord Ceespring went up to be very civil to his hostess, and to express to her in a few well-chosen and flowery speeches, his satisfaction at his son's choice.

He found her outraged, it is true, but bearing her annoyance with fortitude and discretion. The dear Dean was talking to her—sympathising with her !

Now the Dean of Blankhampton was a remark-

ably handsome man, as handsome in his way as Lord Ceespring was in his, and a great deal more powerful—personally powerful, I mean. He was big and stalwart, with a different kind of bigness to John, by Divine Providence, Bishop of the Diocese; for he was strong, muscular, clean-limbed and broad-chested, with his head carried proudly yet without any of the supercilious hauteur which so strongly distinguished the bearing of ME, who had a sort of "salt of the earth" air about him, and a great deal of that spurious dignity which you give to a horse by putting him in a bearing-rein.

The handsome Dean was in radiant spirits that evening, for it happened that he had for weeks past been warmly discussing—through the medium of the public press—with ME the advisability of a certain festival being kept in such and such a way.

Now, this was not, by a long way, the first time that the Dean and the Bishop of Blankhampton had looked at certain matters from a different stand-point and in a totally different light. And although up to the present time, the Dean had undoubtedly gained in dignity, (most people who tried a tussle with ME did that), the Bishop had equally undoubtedly gained in substance, and in the points at issue.

But this time, the Dean had come off victor on all hands, had routed the Bishop—Horse, Foot, and Dragoons—and the great ME had retired into his palace in the sulks in consequence.

Therefore, the dear Dean was simply radiant—

radiant, and he comforted his distressed little hostess with a dexterity and a tenderness which spoke as well for his kind heart, as his manners did for his good breeding; and Mrs. Trafford was comforted, muchly. Thus matters stood when Lord Ceespring joined them.

“ You’re worrying yourself about that rascal, Mrs. Trafford,” he said promptly. “ I wish you wouldn’t—he really isn’t worth it, although at the same time it’s very annoying to be taken in—very annoying.”

“ I shall *never* get over it, Lord Ceespring,” cried Mrs. Trafford tragically.

“ Oh! yes—yes—you’ll forget it to-morrow,” he returned soothingly.

“ And if you find you can’t,” put in the Dean—“ you must try and console yourself, Mrs. Trafford, by remembering how very much worse things might have been.”

“ Egad, yes,” chuckled the old lord with a wicked twinkle in his eye—“ things might have gone so much further, you know.”

Mrs. Trafford shuddered, and her sharp little face grew quite pale under its little touching-up of colour, for she remembered with a horrible sickening sensation of horror, too great to feel relief as yet from the evening’s discovery, that the old lord had indeed just hit the nail fair and plump upon the head.

“ He presumed to ask me to marry him, the lying wretch,” she said to herself indignantly—and

then she gave a great sigh of relief—"and what a mercy of Heaven that I told him I'd think about it, instead of saying 'yes' outright."

Yes, indeed things might have gone very much further; but nobody knew that, and Mrs. Trafford took a mental vow at that moment that that particular piece of information should be buried within her breast for ever, and that she would never share her secret with a living soul. I think on the whole, it was rather a good thing for her that she had had so narrow an escape, for the sense of burning shame within her caused her to be less haughty and distinctly less condescending, even to the least exalted of her guests, than she probably would have been upon so great an occasion, and so proud an occasion as that which had gathered such a company together; and naturally everyone was on the look-out for the little signs of self-satisfaction and pride, which any ordinary *human* woman might be expected to display at such a time.

But to the intense surprise of everyone, Mrs. Trafford was not puffed up in the least, if anything she was less pronounced, less perky, less aggressive than Blankhampton people had ever known her.

She had gathered a goodly crowd together, in fact, all the notables of Blankhampton Society except ME, who, after all, could hardly be classed among them, insomuch as he made quite a parade of having neither part nor parcel with the towns-people, except distinctly in the way of patronage.

But there were at least a dozen parsons, almost

all of them just then gathered together in a corner discussing what one of them irreverently called "the shindy" between ME and the Dean.

"He'll take it out of the Dean some way or other," this man declared, with a laugh—"a bishop can make himself pretty nasty when he likes."

"And he will like," said one of the others with conviction.

"I wonder how he'll do it?" said the first one—Roberts was his name, by the bye. "He'll never forgive him for getting the best of him."

"Did anyone ever accomplish that before?" asked a youngster, whose fine voice had put him into a minor-canony at five-and-twenty.

"Never heard of it," laughed Roberts, who was a jovial soul and would have his laugh at the expense of anything or anybody.

"Oh! yes—I've known several fellows that didn't care a dump for him," struck in Molyneux, who was the oldest of all the minor-canons. "There was poor Garth. Did any of you know Garth?"

"I did," answered Chalmers.

"What a dear old chap he was," Molyneux continued—"always cheery and pleasant and happy. Never heard him say a bad word of anyone in my life but of ME. He couldn't stand him."

"And he got the better of ME?" someone asked.

"Oh! distinctly. It was like this. You all know what favourites the great John has, and how he will take the bread out of one hard-working parish-priest's mouth in order to put jam on the top of one

of his sycophants' bread-and-butter? Well, it happened that Garth, who wasn't a favourite, and Mildemay, who was, had parishes adjoining one another. Garth's parish was six thousand, Mildemay's was but three. Well, 'John' wanted to persuade Garth to give up a good slice of his parish to increase Mildemay's and so make it eligible for various grants towards a new rectory just then being planned, and also to bring it up to the population—that is, five thousand—necessary for it to be brought into his scheme for raising the value of his benefices.

"Now, this was all right enough, but poor Garth's living would then have been just below the number, nor was there the smallest chance of the population increasing. Besides that, Garth's was a Dean and Chapter living and, as he said, it wouldn't have been common honesty of him to go cutting it into nothing just to please ME. So Garth flatly refused to make over the desired slice to make up the deficiency of Mildemay's numbers.

"And John was furious! He couldn't stop Garth from getting enough grants to build his rectory but he could stop him from building it where it was most agreeable and convenient—and he did.

"This way—Neither Garth nor Mildemay could for sheer want of room find a decent site within their parishes, so each resolved with John's necessary consent, to build in a pleasant part just outside both parishes but at almost precisely the same

distance from their respective churches. They had each made all their arrangements and concluded the purchases provided the Bishop's consent was obtained, and then when Garth went to ask for it John asked him plump whether he would give up that slice of his parish or not? Garth said no, he couldn't.

“‘You *won’t*?’ said John frowning.

“‘No—my lord,’ said Garth—‘I *cannot*.’

“The great ME sat for a minute in silence, tapping with his fingers on the table and frowning darkly—at last he spoke. ‘Mr. Garth,’—said he slowly and deliberately, ‘do—you—think—it *wise*—to go against the Bishop of your diocese?’

“Garth, poor dear old chap, lost his temper at this and answered the great John out straight and fair, looking him full in the eyes the while. ‘It may not be *wise*, my lord,’ said he—‘but it is *honest*! I have to think of my patrons and of those who will come after me, and *as a gentleman*,’ with emphasis on the word, ‘I cannot play ducks and drakes with my parish to suit your lordship’s whims and caprices.’

“And John promptly refused his consent to let Garth build his rectory anywhere outside his parish; and like the crafty beggar he is, he tempered his refusal with a lot of good reasons which made it sound fair and reasonable after all.

“‘I *feel*,’ he wrote to Garth—‘that it is most important that the clergy shall dwell in the midst of their people; therefore I shall be happy to give my

consent to your building upon any site which you are able to secure within your own parish—' and as there wasn't a site to be bought for love or money from one end of the parish to the other, he thought he had fairly put Garth in a corner.

"But he hadn't! Garth turned the matter over in his mind, and then he called in an architect, and they had a consultation or two, and finally, they squeezed as good a rectory as anyone need care to live in, into a corner of the churchyard, which was long disused and very small and awkward in shape. They took the plans to John, and as they had got the requisite number of rooms of the requisite size, he had to give in. Of course, Leroy's house is, as you all know, as odd a looking place as you could find anywhere, built in fact, to the shape of the bit of ground lying between the north wall of the chancel and the houses which form the boundary of the churchyard on that side. Oh, yes," Molyneux wound up—"Poor dear old Garth unmistakably got the better of him over that business and the great John hated him like poison ever after; in fact that feeling went with the living, and Leroy has never had a minute's peace since he got it."

Assuredly the shadow of "ME" was well loved by the people—the "good peepul"—of Blankhampton!

The jovial parson whose name was Roberts, asked a question, which sent the whole group off into a fit of laughter.

"Did it ever occur to you that John Blankhamp-

ton is uncommonly like Cardinal Wolsey?" he remarked. "I've often thought of it—as this,

'Though from an humble stock, undoubtedly
Was fashioned to much honour from his cradle.'

—and a bit further on—

'Lofty and sour to them that loved him not,
But to those that sought him, sweet as summer.'

Isn't it very like our John?"

"Very," returned Molyneux drily—"Depends upon how you seek him though! If you can only bring yourself to lick the ground under his feet and let him kick you while you're down there you stand a good chance, and then if you haven't got any impediments in the shape of good birth behind you—for if you have, you'll have just ten times the quantity of snivel to do—or good looks or talent as a preacher, and are generally the sort of stick to make the whole world ask why he ever dreamt of taking any notice of you at all—why, then, he will pile benefits upon you, one on the top of another, till you turn up your nose in disgust at the mere mention of a Colonial Bishopric, and in time, become a washy edition of John, with a little circle of parasites of your own."

"But it's all very like Wolsey," Roberts maintained, with a gay laugh.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LION IN THE WAY !

“ Patience is power. With time and patience the mulberry-leaf becomes satin.”

—EASTERN SAYING.

NATURALLY, during that evening Mrs. Trafford’s thoughts were chiefly centred on the delinquent “ Vyvyan !” And when her guests—who had certainly, one and all, enjoyed themselves thoroughly—had departed and only Marcus Orford and Staunton remained of them all, she was able to relieve her mind and feelings by sitting down and talking over the dreadful incident.

“ But why should the fellow have fixed upon *me* ?” she cried, when Orford suggested that, as likely as not, the scoundrel was after the spoons. “ I haven’t got any spoons—at least not such spoons as to be worth so long a process of stealing.”

“ But you know people in the place who have,” Orford reminded her.

Mrs. Trafford looked fairly scared.

“ But—good Heavens, my dear boy, you don’t suppose,” she burst out—“ that he thought I—I—was to be drawn into dealings of that kind——” but the rest of her remarks were drowned by Orford’s yells of laughter.

Laugh ! He laughed as if he had suddenly been

turned into a machine for laughing, and had been set going by somebody who didn't know how to stop it. It was irresistible ; one by one the others joined in, until at last even Mrs. Trafford herself forgot her fears and vexation and laughed as heartily as any of them.

“ Oh ! Mrs. Traff’—Mrs. Traff’ ! ” cried Orford, when at last he was capable of speaking. “ You’ll be the death of me, some day, ’pon my word you will.”

“ My dear boy—” she began.

“ Oh ! he may have had partnership prospects in his head,” Orford laughed—“ And after all, he’s not to be blamed for *that*,” chuckling within himself to see how the little lady flushed all over her face, and little dreaming what a good hit he had made—“ He got an introduction to you, and you could have passed him on to some very good houses, particularly good from his point of view. There’s the Mansion House and all the costly array of civic plate, which shines out in all its glory at the banquets and ball-suppers. And then there’s the Deanery—I dare say they’ve got a very well filled plate-chest there ; and doubtless he had an idea of the Mess-silver, to say nothing of the Blankshire Mess, and one or two other little pickings, such as Miss To-To’s wedding-presents and so on. Has he ever been to the River House, do you know ? ”

“ Oh ! yes—Mr. Winks told me he was there yesterday,” said Staunton, who was trying, as he had been trying all the evening, to edge nearer

Laura, a difficult process to accomplish for, on her side, Laura edged away from him every time he sidled a step nearer to her.

“Ah! then, he probably gauged the value of the tea service pretty accurately,” Orford went on coolly—“Trust a swell cracksman to know what he’s going after. However, he has done for himself in Blank-hampton since he was idiot enough to blunder into my father’s road; it’s just possible, yes, and not particularly improbable, that we may hear of some little job he has done what you might call *en route*: let me see, the beggar was staying at the ‘Golden Swan.’ Then I’ve no doubt he has had a try for my lady’s jewel-case.”

There was a general outcry at this, all the half-scared women sympathising already with Lady Ceespring that there was the chance of such a misfortune befalling her.

“I shall never forgive myself if anything of the kind happens,” Mrs. Trafford exclaimed.

“Oh! I don’t suppose it will,” Orford returned carelessly, trying to allay the fears which he had raised “My Lord’s man is an uncommonly clever fellow—and although it has been tried several times, nobody has ever been able to get at anything that was under his charge yet.”

“Orford—it’s after two,” put in Staunton, who could stand the state of affairs with Laura no longer.

“Yes, old fellow, we ought to be off. Good-night, Mrs. Traff’—pray don’t worry yourself about

that villain any further, he's not worth it, 'pon my word he isn't."

There was a general exchange of "good-nights," a few of which followed them out into the street.

"Poor dears," said Orford, with a laugh as the chain and bolts were fastened with enough noise and clamour for a prison or a lunatic-asylum—"now they will go round in a body and see that everything is safe and sound. Do you hear that?" as the key was twice turned in the lock—"And all to protect themselves against that charming gentleman, Mr. Vivian Vyvyan, of Stormount."

"You think it is safe?" said Staunton, looking up at the house, distinguished then from all its neighbours by the lights in the windows.

"Why, yes, man alive," Orford laughed—"What would the fellow go for? Take my word for it, he went up to Town by the mail—if he belongs to the swell mob, he wouldn't do any good by hanging about a place where he has been unmasked."

"No—I daresay not," in a dull tone.

As they walked briskly down the street—for there was not a cab to be seen—Orford turned and looked keenly into his comrade's face; not that he could see much, for the moon was not visible and it was a starless night.

"What is it, old chap?" he asked kindly.

Staunton turned his head away. "Nothing much," he answered shortly.

There was a moment's silence, and then Orford took his friend's arm. "Yes it is, old chap," he

said—"it is something—something that's hurting you pretty much. Tell me about it."

"Oh! I can't," trying to free his arm and then, as Orford would not set it free, letting it hang limp and nerveless by his side.

"Old fellow," said Orford, squeezing the limp limb to show his friendship—"I've seen it ever so long—I know all about it. I'm not going to worry you or seek to pry into your feelings—that ain't in my line, as you know—but I will tell you this, that that poor little woman is ten times as wretched—"

"She won't speak to me if she can help it," Staunton burst out.

"Pooh! nonsense. Why don't you speak out plainly and tell her, like a man, what you want?"

"I can't get a chance."

"Bosh! Haven't you had a hundred chances this very night?"

"No, I haven't—not one."

"Then you ought to have made 'em," returned Orford, who for all his good nature, had but little sympathy with a faint heart and diffident spirit. He forgot that Staunton, although a baronet and as handsome as was good for any man to be, was as poor as a church-mouse, and that his prospects, as they depended upon the caprices of two aged maiden ladies, were very uncertain of ever bearing fruit.

It was just possible—yes and in the case of Miss Lavinia Staunton it was very probable—that the fortune which he had been led to look upon as

certain to be his one day, would be left to found an institution for the benefit of superannuated ladys'-maids and reformed drunkards. He was therefore anything but sure that Mrs. Trafford's youngest and fairest flower would accept him, if he summoned up enough courage to put the question to her plump and fair. He had never had a particularly good opinion of himself; and that pretty, brightgo-a head Laura could be, as she was, over head and ears in love with him, never entered his mind—not as a reasonable thought, that is. True, there were moments—when he was shaving generally—when such a dream came to him, but the thought of his bank-book invariably and rudely dispelled it.



CHAPTER XX.

THE DEAN'S SERMON.

“Lie engenders lie. Once committed, the liar has to go on in his course of lying. It is the penalty of his transgression.”

—F. JACOX.

BUT very few people who had been present at Mrs. Trafford's evening reception had been introduced to either Lord or Lady Ceespring, yet when Sunday came round and fashionable people began to gather for morning service in “the Parish,” not only those who had been at Mrs. Trafford's party but also those who had not, knew that the beautiful woman dressed in golden brown velvet, who sat in the Deanery pew by the side of Lady Margaret Adair was Lady Ceespring, and that the blue-eyed red-faced old man with fierce white moustache and white curly hair who sat in the stall next to the Dean, was Marcus Orford's father.

It was wonderful to see with what interest the eyes of almost all the worshippers in that sacred fane, turned towards that corner, attracted there doubtless by the fact that Mrs. Farquhar was there for the first time since the shadow of slander had fallen across her fair name, and sitting, not in her own seat near Mrs. Trafford, but, wonder of wonders, next to my Lady Ceespring in the

Deanery pew; and every now and then Lady Ceespring turned her lovely head and smiled gravely and sweetly upon her, as one who would say—"I know this is an ordeal, but never mind—I will take care of you."

I am afraid that there were many unholy thoughts under that sacred roof that day. Mrs. Hildersley sat in her accustomed seat showing a brave—some people, who were believers in poor little Georgie, said a brazen—front; her gown was new, as was her bonnet—and on one wrist she wore a bracelet on which was graven her husband's Christian name, and which had been his gift to her upon her last birthday. She was wearing his gifts just now and talking a good deal to her sympathisers—who were but few, although little Mrs. Farquhar's enemies had become so many—of the trials which beset a poor woman, whose husband has to go on active service.

Truth to tell, when she saw her victim come in that morning under the protection of Lady Ceespring's wing, her brazen spirit fairly quailed within her and her heart—but a poor cowardly sort of a heart, at best—sank down to zero. For all her brave airs, she very heartily wished herself anywhere else at that moment. Look which way she would there was no rest or comfort for her eyes. To the right, under the organ and so almost facing her, sat the cause of all the scandal, Graham; it was no use looking at *him* for he had no looks for her—except once a scowl when their eyes happened

to meet. To the left sat her direst enemy, one Mrs. George Greene, with whom she had shared the attentions of the man who had been her ruin. Perhaps the bearing of that same Mrs. George Greene did more towards keeping her brave front to the world than anything else; for she—poor, vulgar, over-dressed thing, wearing so many beads upon her black satin gown, and upon the bonnet which covered her exaggeratedly-golden head, that she looked most of all like a huge black-beetle in danger of apoplexy—kept rolling her eyes upon the little captain and simpering at him as if all her hopes of happiness were centred in the turn of his gigantic moustache or the elevation of his bushy eyebrows.

And opposite there was Georgie Farquhar's pale reproachful face—the sight off which she could least turn her eyes—with lips compressed and with dark circles under the great dreamy eyes. I am bound to say that as she thought of her enemy Graham on one hand, of her vulgar rival on the other, of the victim before her whose husband was hurrying home to—*what?*—I am bound to say that Emily Hildersley's heart fairly failed her and she wished that she could die where she sat!

But in this life, and in her class of society, there is no sitting down to die, when we get into a mess out of which we see no way. No, Graham had cast her off, Georgie had spoken the truth, Farquhar was on his way home, and there was no sitting down to die nor yet turning back; she had chosen her own

path and must tread it now, even to the very end whether that end be bitter or sweet.

The Dean preached—preached the kind of sermon such as he had a knack of doing, that is a plain honest unvarnished homily on evil-speaking, lying and slandering; and oh! Heavens, how it went home to many a quaking and guilty heart that day! Little Mrs. Trafford, even in all the flush of her brave protection of a deeply-wronged and innocent woman, and her relations with such an august couple as Lord and Lady Ceespring, felt a horrible qualm steal through her, that she had been desperately deceitful both as to Colonel Urquhart and the man “Vyvyan.”

“But it wouldn’t have done to speak out about either of them,” she said, by way of consolation to her own fast-beating heart—“And I have my girls to think of.”

If the Dean’s outspoken words touched Mrs. Trafford thus, imagine the effect of them upon the wretched woman who was staking her *all* to be revenged for the loss of Graham’s favour. She sat frozen with terror—her heart yet burning with shame at what she had done, as the words rang in her ears—“and be sure your sin will find you out.”

And opposite was that pale face turned straight toward the preacher, as the face of a woman in the dock on a trial for murder is strained towards the judge as he sums up the case which must go for or against her, altogether for, or utterly against but with no half-measures at all.

She—that is Emily Hildersley—did not know that her victim's nervous hand crept a little and a little nearer to Lady Ceespring, until that beautiful woman made it a prisoner in hers and kept it so until the sermon was brought to an end and the congregation (such as did not remain for the communion service) were at liberty to pour out into the grand and lofty Nave of the Cathedral. Mrs. Trafford's household had all attended for that service earlier in the day, so they streamed out in the wake of the Dean's wife and Lady Ceespring.

“Come in after the service this afternoon,” said Mrs. Trafford to most of those who pressed up to speak to her; she had almost recovered from her conscience-pricks and become her little, piquant, important self again.

So when the big bell in the clock tower struck five that afternoon, Mrs. Trafford's drawing-room was already well filled with guests and others were streaming in as fast as Cox could announce them.

“My dear Dean,” said Mrs. Trafford impressively to that gentleman when he came in—“your sermon this morning must have been a lesson to many. I never realized what a wicked woman I am so thoroughly before. Oh! if only the truth, the bare and naked truth can but be brought to light out of this miserable and unhappy scandal.”

“It will,” said the Dean promptly—“Your little guest may need patience but, sooner or later, it will come beyond all shadow of doubt—I have very little doubt about the matter now.”

“‘Be sure your sin will find you out,’” murmured Mrs. Trafford, her eyes seeking Georgie Farquhar’s face, then as in the morning under Lady Ceespring’s gentle protection. “There is no sin there, Dean,” she added.

“No!” said the Dean in a tone of conviction.

It was really wonderful how many people there were that afternoon who were quite gushing to “poor dear little Mrs. Farquhar” although but a week or two previously, they had flouted their sanctity in her face and had lifted their pious noses so high in air as they passed her that they seemed to be in search of an unpolluted atmosphere; it was quite surprising—since they had found Lady Ceespring able to breathe beside her—how comfortably they managed to exist on the same contaminated level! It was wonderful—but it was Blankhampton all over.

But Georgie very wisely kept quite close to Lady Ceespring’s side and only replied with anything like cordiality to the greetings of those who had trusted her all along. She did not want to hear Mrs. Hildersley discussed and condemned—she did not want to hear how she had looked during the services that day, not having herself cast even so much as a glance at her—she did not want to hear her name even, though, to be sure, that kept floating to her almost every moment, as scraps of conversation from different groups caught her ear, something like this.

“My dear, she has the most utter”—“I as-

sure you she never flinched all through that terrible sermon."—"Were you at the Parish this morning? Did you ever hear such a sermon in your life?"—"I think it was black satin."—"Oh! had she a bracelet with her husband's name on? Poor fellow!"—and so on, until she began to feel very weary and uncertain about her head, and to long for the whole prattling crowd to go away and leave her in peace.

And then, just as she was beginning to think she could not bear much more of it, and to wonder if it would attract much notice were she to slip away to her own room, her attention was drawn by a slight stir to the door by which a big, brown-faced man had just entered, where he had been seized by Orford, who was shaking his hand as if he would shake it off.

"There she is, with my mother," she heard him say in his heartiest tones.

There was a rush on either side, a cry of "Oh! Charlie"—a sort of scuffle, and in another moment Farquhar had his wife in his arms and was kissing her fiercely, as if he was trying to make up to her for all that a single look was enough to tell him she had suffered!

I don't quite know who it was—it does not matter, God bless him for it anyway—but somebody, despite the day, set up a cheer which was taken up and went from mouth to mouth until Mrs. Trafford's pictures danced on the walls and the china plates and saucers rattled in their wire frames; I more than

half believe it was the dear Dean himself—God bless him anyway, although it proved too much for the little woman in whose honour the shouts rent the air, for when they died away, she was lying on her husband's breast in a dead faint!



CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST BIT OF GOSSIP.

“No cord or cable can draw so forcibly, or bind so fast, as love can do with only a single thread.”

—BURTON.

WHEN Mrs. Trafford saw that the meeting had proved too much for Georgie Farquhar’s shaken nerves to bear and that she had fainted she ran to her assistance.

“Oh ! Captain Farquhar,” she exclaimed—“it has been too sudden for her, poor darling.”

“Yes. I oughtn’t to have come in like that ; but can’t I get her out of this ?” he asked.

“Yes, of course—bring her in here,” going towards the boudoir—“Yes, lay her down on this sofa—it is very comfortable and cosy being so wide. It is nothing—don’t alarm yourself, she will be all right presently ; the surprise has been a little too much for her, that is all.”

Mrs. Trafford had, while she was speaking, quietly unfastened the unconscious girl’s gown at the throat, and then Madge came in bringing a bottle of lavender-water, followed by Orford carrying a glass containing a little brandy in one hand and a bottle of soda-water in the other.

“Dear Madge, how thoughtful you are,” Mrs. Trafford exclaimed, beginning at once to bathe their

patient's temples with the refreshing lotion—"Oh! we shall be all right directly—she is coming round now. Yes, my dearie, it is all right—don't look so anxious—he is here," she went on addressing little Georgie soothingly—"He is here—And Marcus has turned up with his *inevitable* remedy."

With a little coaxing and persuading, she was induced to try Orford's remedy and to lie back again. Mrs. Trafford fussed about her and tried to put off the strangeness of the situation as much as she could.

"There—let me put that cushion straight—That's better. Now, I'll put this shawl over your feet so! Is that comfortable? And mind, you are not to indulge in any more fainting! Do you hear? That cannot be allowed for a moment."

Mrs. Farquhar possessed herself of the little widow's plump hand.

"Charlie, she's been so good to me—so good to me," she began.

"No, my dear. I can't allow it," Mrs. Trafford broke in briskly. "We will talk about that *next* year or the year after; not now, Georgie dear, *please*."

"I must tell Charlie——"

"No—no—it will only upset you—and it will certainly upset *me*," returned Mrs. Trafford, who knew—no one better—that she always looked a horrid fright after she had been weeping, and therefore had no wish to indulge her feelings in that way until she had got the august couple off her mind.

“I *must* go and look after the people in the drawing-room ; I will send Smith up herself to see what she can do for your husband I daresay he is famished.”

“Oh—er—I—” began Farquhar, with the polite intention of telling a lie rather than admit he was hungry.

“When did you have a meal last ? That is a hard question to answer, is it not ? I know—and Smith shall come up and see what she can do for you. No, it’s no trouble, for we have supper at nine on Sunday, so she has nothing to do till then.”

So Mrs. Trafford got herself out of the room and went back to her friends, who were all anxiously awaiting the last news. But when the door was closed behind her, she dropped her airy and fussy manner and went into the drawing-room with a very grave face indeed.

“The truth is that this horrible business has taken far more hold upon her than anyone who did not know her very well would believe,” she said in answer to the first eager questions. “Oh ! yes, she is conscious. Oh ! yes, but looks so pale and wan, poor thing.”

“The sermon this morning was too much for her,” said Lady Ceespring.”

“Yes—I wonder how Mrs. Hildersley relished it ?” said some one else—and then the full swing of gossip went to and fro once more ; what he said, and she said, and everybody else said, where they met and how they looked, and—with greatest interest of all—what the consequences were.

They call that sort of thing—society !

And as soon as that particular section of society found that Mrs. Trafford had no more to tell of the meeting between husband and wife, it began to melt away, as it were, out of her dwelling. It was really quite surprising to Mrs. Trafford to find that people who were in the regular habit of staying until the very last moment, had important letters to get off by the quarter-past-eight mail, or had promised to peep in upon a sick friend on their way home, or particularly wanted to go to service in one of the many churches in the town that night. Of them all only one said boldly that she was sure Mrs. Trafford wouldn't mind her running away, but the fact was Maria Rochester was confined to the house with a bad cold and, added this brave lady, “I really must go in and tell her the news.”

So Mrs. Trafford was rid of all her visitors in comparatively good time, almost the last to leave being Lord and Lady Ceespring, who were dining at their hotel that evening.

“ I should like to say ‘ how d’you do ’ to Captain Farquhar,” said Lady Ceespring, as she drew her furs closer about her.

“ You shall. I’ll go in and fetch him,” said Mrs. Trafford.

So, with a good deal of noise to herald her approach, Mrs. Trafford invaded the little boudoir.

“ I am sorry to disturb you,” she began—

Farquhar jumped up “ You will never come too

often for either of us, Mrs. Trafford," he exclaimed, in a tone as if he meant what he said.

"Never," echoed Georgie with conviction.

"Thank you, my dears, thank you," said Mrs. Trafford, with a flush of pleasure—"Not that I would have disturbed you just now; only Lady Ceespring would like to speak to you before they go."

"And she's been so good to me, Charlie," added his wife.

"I will come at once," said Farquhar immediately.

"I must thank you from the very bottom of my heart for all your kindness to my wife, Lady Ceespring," he said, when she held out her hand to him and told him that it was well he was home again.

"What are you going to do with that fellow, Graham?" demanded the old Lord bluntly.

A very ugly look swept over Charles Farquhar's face.

"Well, Lord Ceespring," he answered—"I have but one course open to me; if I can't make Mrs. Hildersley and Graham—especially Graham—eat their words absolutely and utterly, I must go into Court and see what we shall see there."

"But you'll make him eat his words first, or try to," Lord Ceespring chuckled. "That's right—that's right. By the by, you know my son has already stood proxy for you in that respect?"

"No—" in surprise.

"Ah!—I missed it myself, but I saw from my

son's knuckles afterwards that he hadn't been half-hearted about it! Well, you know the Orfords are not a half-hearted sort of race—I never was, never. Yes, my Lady, I'm coming. I'm coming. Good-bye Farquhar—good-bye, my dear—good-bye."

Mrs. Trafford stood at the window watching the august couple cross the broad pavement in front of the house and get into the carriage.

"Dear old man," she said tenderly—"and I do hope, Captain Farquhar, that you *will* make that detestable wretch eat his words, every one of them."

"I'll try my best, Mrs. Trafford," returned Farquhar, with a modest air of belief in himself.



CHAPTER XXII.

▲ PERIOD OF GRACE.

“Two are better than one; for if one fall, he can help the other, but woe unto him who is alone when he falleth.”

—SOLOMON.

THE following day Farquhar and Orford went together to Captain Graham’s office.

“Is Captain Graham here?” demanded Farquhar of the orderly, who appeared in answer to his summons.

“Yes, sir, he is,” returned the man, thereby earning a hearty curse from his master for his idiocy in being so honest; not that he cared, for Graham was no favourite with his subordinates, indeed, on the contrary, he was thoroughly glad of the chance of dealing his superior what he called “one in the eye.”

Therefore they were ushered into Graham’s presence and found him standing facing the door looking like a criminal brought to the scaffold, rather than like an officer and a gentleman and a man of honour. His face was livid, his lips were white, his hands were clenched, aye, and his very knees trembled and shook under him.

There were some traces still left upon his face of the thrashing he had had from Orford, whom he could cheerfully at that moment have *killed* as he

stood upright and stiff as a ramrod behind his friend. Right dearly would he have liked to order Orford out of his office—and perhaps if he had had a greater command over his lips he might have done so: as it was he kept silent for the excellent reason that he could not speak, which on the whole was just as well, for Orford certainly would not have gone at his bidding.

“ You are Captain Graham ? ” began Farquhar in a short business-like tone.

Graham replied by a short jerky bow.

“ My name is Farquhar——” then there was a long pause, during which Graham shrunk visibly, and Farquhar seemed to get bigger, and browner, and stronger-looking than ever. “ You needn’t shiver like that,” he went on eyeing the other contemptuously—“ I’m not going to thrash you just yet. But I want to know what the devil you mean by saying my wife ever meant to throw *me* over for *you* ? ”

The unutterable scorn and contempt in face and voice pulled Graham back to something like self-possession.

“ I daresay you’ll think it very bad taste on her part ; ” he said in a shaking voice which he tried his hardest to make cool and unconcerned—“ nevertheless, it is true.”

“ It’s a lie—a cursed lie ! ” thundered Farquhar getting a step nearer to him.

“ It is true—” returned Graham deliberately—“ no—I’m not afraid of your ‘ *thrashing* ’ me, as

you call it—for I have provided myself against that contingency.”—As he spoke, he pulled out a revolver, and with an ugly sneer, levelled it at Farquhar.—“I expected something of this kind,” he went on, “and by the Heaven above me, I swear I’ll shoot the first of you that moves a step towards me.”

It was all very dramatic, and admirably done as regards swagger, but unfortunately for him, he had forgotten the length of Marcus Orford’s legs. Immediately the threat of using the revolver left his mouth one of those long limbs went out and neatly tripped him—the next moment he was sprawling on the floor face downwards, when Orford pinned him by either wrist. He just relieved him of the pistol and let him go free.

“Get up, you little toad,” he said, with big contempt—“and answer Captain Farquhar without any more of that rot.”

“I have answered Captain Farquhar,” said Graham furiously. “I’ll answer him again. I tell you your wife *did* intend to throw you over for me—she *did* come to me here in this office—she *did* start from your house to meet me that night, and would have been with me now if Emily Hildersley had not got scent of it and persuaded her to go back again.”

Farquhar looked half puzzled for an instant. “Emily Hildersley!” he repeated. “Are you in the habit of calling her ‘Emily’?”

“Your wife always calls her so,” returned Graham curtly.

“H—’m! Ah!—By the by, do you happen to know what my wife’s name is?”

“Of course, I do,” he returned with an admirable appearance of carelessness, although in truth it was as awkward a question as Farquhar could have set him, for as it happened, he had not the very faintest idea of the name in question.

“What is it?” Farquhar persisted.

“I never called her by it,” returned Graham trying to carry it off with a high hand. “I always called her by some pet name or other.”

“Indeed,” drily. “All the same, I should like to hear her name, if you please.”

“It is Mary,” said Graham, with a devout prayer that his shot might prove a bull’s-eye.

“Mary—Ah!” was Farquhar’s comment. “And you persist in your statement that my wife left my house one night to seek your protection and that Mrs. Hildersley brought her back again?”

“I do,” said Graham steadily—“It may be very unpalatable to you, Farquhar—”

“Captain Farquhar—if you please,” put in Farquhar quickly.

“I beg your pardon, *Captain* Farquhar,” with a mock ceremonious bow, such as made Orford positively long to kick him—“I say, it may be unpalatable to you—and you may take full advantage of your size and weight, which are superior to mine—but it is true, absolutely true.”

“Captain Graham,” said Farquhar in suppressed rage—“I’m not going to take any advantage of my

superior size and weight at present, but I am going to make you eat your own vile, lying words, sooner or later, every one of them—every one of them ; *after* that, by Heaven, I will give you a hiding, take my word for it.”

“ I shall not take back a word that I have said.”

“ Won’t you? Then I shall have go to the trouble of *proving* you to be the most damnable liar in existence; do as you please—it will give me a little more trouble but it will be practically the same for you in the end—only that every day you put off telling and acknowledging the truth, the worse it will be for you.”

“ Very well—prove anything you can. I can bring proof on my side; you can ask my orderly now—he will tell you all the particulars of your wife’s interview here with me, a few days before we planned the elopement. Ask him—I’ll send for him now—he will tell you how she came here and—”

“ Man!” exclaimed Farquhar, “ do you think I would condescend to insult my wife by—*asking*—*your* orderly a single question about her? Why—but there,” he broke off with withering contempt—“ what do you know of the respect an honourable man shows to his wife! It’s useless to prolong this interview. I only give you warning that if I don’t have your full denial of and apology for this damnable story you have trumped up against my wife within forty-eight hours, I shall instruct my solicitors to proceed against you at once—and then

I shall go on with it to the bitter end and accept no retraction or denial except in court. Do you distinctly understand me?"

"You have my answer," said Graham slowly and deliberately—"You have grossly insulted me, sir, and so I tell you, do your worst and be d—d to you."

"Very well," said Farquhar. "I will do what you call my worst—and I promise you *it shall be my best!*"

Farquhar drew a long, long breath when he and Orford got out in to the fresh air once more.

"Don't you feel as if you'd been shut up with some pestilent vermin?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Orford; he was a shade disappointed that Farquhar had not been led into half-murdering Graham.

"I must get proof of her innocence somehow," Farquhar went on, following the thread of his thoughts.

"Don't know how it's to be done," returned Orford. "You see Mrs. Hildersley sticks to her story as obstinately as that little *cad* Graham does to his."

"And her name is 'Mary,'" said Farquhar, with grim amusement.

"Yes—that's a great point in your favour of course," Orford said, with a laugh. "But all the same, it's scarcely as good *proof* as you would like to have."

"As I *must* have," rejoined Farquhar in a decided voice.

Now the word “must” is but a poor sort of a word when it is backed up by nothing but its own strength, and so Farquhar found it when he came to still further sifting out the evidence required to make his wife’s case good; in fact he found that he simply could not get any conclusive evidence which would be in her favour. He turned out all the letters which she had written to him whilst he was in Egypt—he read every word of them again and again, but although they candidly and frankly made him acquainted with every detail of the doings of that unlucky night, on which she had sallied forth, secure in the consciousness of her own large-hearted innocence, to do battle with the Devil in the shape of a wicked man and to save a fellow-woman from perdition, there was nothing, absolutely nothing which could *prove* that the apparent freshness and candour was not so much mere dust, with which he was to be blinded and put off the real scent.

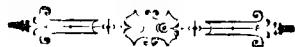
He was very busy during the period of grace which he had given to the miscreant Graham, for he never thought of sitting down and quietly waiting to see what that person would do. No, he went hither and thither making enquiries—he held two consultations with a legal man of Blankhampton and he wrote a very long letter to his lawyers in Town, but nothing came to light which could in any way help him to *prove* the innocence of his wife.

And though the hours went by and there were

now but very few of the eight and forty left, Graham made no sign.

“ It’s no use calling in detectives yet,” Farquhar said to Orford, who had been urging him to take that course. “ It will be time enough for that when the little cad has fairly thrown down the gauntlet, which I don’t believe he will do. Oh ! no, not he—he’ll keep me in suspense till the very last minute and then he’ll give in and try to shuffle out of the whole thing as being a joke or something of that kind. As to defying me and letting me take it into court—why, he’ll never do it.”

But, nevertheless, the time of grace went by and Captain Graham made not the slightest sign.



CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FINAL PLUNGE.

“The world is a very bright world, and, all things considered, an extremely satisfactory world, as far as comfort is concerned.”

—FABER.

THERE was now nothing for Farquhar to do but bid his lawyers get on as quickly as possible with proceedings against Graham and Mrs. Hildersley for defamation of his wife’s character.

On the evening of the second day from his interview with Graham he took his wife back to their own house, a little to Mrs. Trafford’s annoyance although, in truth, she hardly knew which way to turn she was so busy in making preparations for Madge’s wedding.

“Why should you go?” she said vexedly, for she was a resolute and persistent little person and when she took up a cause of any kind liked to carry it through to the very end, to sift it to the very bottom and arrange every circumstance in any way connected with it as became a little woman, who prided herself on being *thorough*—“It looks as if—as if, now you have come home, we didn’t get on or that you were not satisfied or something of that kind. And really in this hotbed of gossip, it is best not to risk setting tongues going again—I assure you it is.”

Farquhar laughed—

“Dear Mrs. Trafford—” he said in a tone of deep feeling which he tried hard to make light—“I shall never be able to thank you enough for what you have done for my wife, who is dearer to me than anything else in all the world. As long as I live I shall always remember that she was alone against the world, and that she came to you in her distress—I shall always remember that you took her in and gave her such comfort as perhaps nobody else in all England could or would have done.”

“Oh! no,” murmured the little widow, with a blush. “Oh! no, I only did what any good woman would have done. It was nothing.”

“Mrs. Trafford—” said he—“it *was* something—it was a woman’s good name, and you kept it good in spite of all the lies which seem to fill the air of this place! Oh! you were a very angel of goodness to my wife and, believe me, the world will never learn from any word or manner of mine that I think otherwise. But we feel—both of us—that you have your hands full just now, and that you must be worried almost to death one way or another, so it will be best for us to go to our own house. Besides, Georgie, wants to get the whole place made habitable from roof to cellar, for she means to put every spare room at your disposal when the great event comes off.”

Until the last sentence he had spoken so earnestly that Mrs. Trafford’s eyes were full of tears.

“Then you shall go,” she said in a trembling

voice—"And Georgie will come very often, very often indeed, I hope, to see me and hear all that is going on, and to tell me all the news on your side."

So the Farquhars left Mrs. Trafford's house and went back to their own house and the preparations for Marcus Orford's wedding went gaily and briskly on.

The august couple, Lord and Lady Ceespring, after waiting no less than ten days in Blankhampton in the vain hope that the old lord might have the pleasure of seeing Farquhar horse-whip the slanderer of his wife's fair name, had gone back to Orford Place, whither a few days later, Orford was to take Madge to visit them; and for the time Blankhampton really seemed to be fairly quiet and free from gossip.

As regarded the Farquhar-Hildersley-Graham mystery, society was biding its time: of a truth people were non-plussed and did not know what to make of it—they were honestly puzzled and for the life of them could not tell who was in the right and who in the wrong although on the whole the tide was if anything on the turn in favour of Mrs. Farquhar. Still—as Mrs. George Greene was loud in declaring—it was strange that the Farquhars were able to produce no proof of the lady's innocence, and although that florid and splendid lady—yes, she *was* splendid, her garments always were so glittering and sheeny—did not count for much in the way of influence, yet the common-sense

apparent in the remark struck everybody to whom she made it, and they naturally enough spread it far and wide, so between the dictates of ordinary common-sense and the fact that Lord and Lady Ceespring, together with the Dean and dear Lady Margaret, had openly professed themselves as true believers in her absolute innocence, the good people of Blankhampton were at a standstill; like the donkey between two bundles of hay, they knew not which to choose, and not knowing simply, aye and very wisely, just stood still and awaited the development of events.

Mrs. George Greene enlarged very floridly and graphically upon the subject.

“It’s such a mistake you know raking up little flirtations and so on that really mean nothing, nothing at all. Why, dear me, people might even say all sorts of dreadful things about *me* just because I happen to know Captain Graham rather well. I’m sure, though he is really one of the most absolutely charming men I ever knew—except that dear Bootles, whom I really *loved*—he never said a word to me which might not be shouted aloud from the house-tops. *I* don’t believe he ever meant to run away with *either* of them, though I’ve no doubt they both ran after him shamefully.”

This was what Mrs. George Greene *said* about it—but, all the same, in her heart of hearts she devoutly blessed her stars—oh! no, that’s not slang, it is more after the fashion of soothsaying, in which Mrs. George Greene was a true believer—that there

was, owing to the diligence with which the fierce light of scandal had been thrown upon the actions of Mrs. Farquhar and Mrs. Hildersley, not the most remote chance of *her* little flirtations being told in Gath or published in the streets of Askelon !

They say it is an ill wind that blows nobody good ! Aye, and it was a lucky day for Mrs. George Greene when the finger of scorn was pointed at another woman !

Really at this time Blankhampton folk were quite hard up for something to chat about, for the preparations for Madge Trafford's wedding were carried on without much fuss and, except among themselves, the family at No. 7 St. Eve's did not discuss them very much ; certainly, there was nothing of the fuss and parade which had attended To-To Antrobus's bridal arrangements, and no coining and putting into circulation of such marvellous stories of the glories and grandeurs to come. Naturally enough ; for Madge's diamonds, her gold-mounted dressing-case, her dark sables, her victoria and high-stepping ponies, her social position and her settlements were all assured facts and needed no "bounce" to convince the world that they had an existence.

But with poor little To-To Brentham it was all quite different. After ten days spent amid the delights of London—where she had never been in all her life before—she and the festive Herrick came back to Blankhampton on their way to visit the dear old gentleman who was a little "odd."

It is surely at this point of the story almost needless for me to say that To-To gave herself airs! She wore a white feather, and, like most young ladies who have not been long married, she, who had all her life gone on foot, now found it a sheer impossibility to walk more than a few yards on her own feet. Consequently, Blankhampton for several days was edified by the sight of an open cab containing the bride and Mrs. Hugh who sat on the back seat, while opposite to them was the charming countenance of Herrick, who had just the expression of a man about to recite *The Charge of the Light Brigade* to an audience of which he was not sure.

Polly flatly declined to attend this particular parade; she did not like cabs and she said that she saw more than enough of the bride and bridegroom at meal times.

But To-To did not remain very long in Blankhampton; rather did she flash like some familiar comet which had acquired a new tail across the horizon of her youth's world. Then comet and tail alike vanished in the direction of that earthly paradise—a brighter and sunnier clime than common-place Blankhampton people knew aught of—wherein in the sweet seclusion of the bosom of his family, dwelt the delightful old gentleman, who was a little “odd.”

And as after this Lord Charterhouse went away for a few days, the gossips had nothing to talk about but dear Lady Margaret's new feather or the latest accident caused by the Lord Bishop's big ark

of a 'bus. Upon the latter item of news they settled down with the ravenous interest of a cloud of flies upon a piece of raw meat, they discussed it in all its bearings—they turned it inside-out, so to speak, and viewed it from every possible standpoint. How there never were such mixtures of cool impudence and supercilious arrogance as the men-servants of ME—how, in this case the high and mighty coachman had deliberately run a poor fellow down, explaining blandly, when the by-standers angrily upbraided him for what he had done, that he was “really very sorry—didn’t mean to hurt the poor chap—but thought he had plenty of time to get out of the way.”

“Queer thing it is,” remarked one parson to another—“that you can always tell a man’s breed by his servants’ manners. ‘Pon my word, one never gets such cheek anywhere as one gets at the Palace ; somehow superciliousness and cheek seem to pervade the whole place.”

“Yes—the last time I went to see John,” laughed the other—“I went off in rather a hurry and when I got into the hall, the butler asked me in a crushing tone if I should like to have my coat brushed before I went in to see his lordship? I gave a look at myself and if I hadn’t forgotten to change my coat. I’d washed my hands and all that—for I’d been gardening that morning—but I’d forgotten to change an old shooting-jacket that I always wear about the garden. So I took his offer of a brush-down and, upon my word, he brushed me down as

gingerly as if I'd been rolling about the stable-yard. All the same though, when I gave him half-a-crown for doing it he took that without any mincing and finger-tips."

"Ah! yes, I've no doubt—that was another thing altogether," said the first man.

But if the City of Blankhampton was on the whole, very dull just then, the pretty house in St. Eve's was as blithe and bright as well could be. The Traffords were all as merry as crickets and as busy as bees, and in the general air of hilarity Laura quite forgot to look askance at Staunton—who rose to the occasion as a brave man and a gentleman ought to do.

It happened thus: He went to call one day to take a box of fruit for Mrs. Trafford which had come from Orford in charge of a servant, who had been to Orford Place with a horse which he had bought for his father. Orford might just as well have sent the box straight to Mrs. Trafford but he knew it would be a good excuse for Sir Anthony Staunton's going to the house where his beloved was. As may be believed, Staunton did not lose a moment in availing himself of the opportunity thus given him, and when he reached St. Eve's and was told that Mrs. Trafford was at home, Cox showed him up into the drawing-room, where he found neither Mrs. Trafford nor Julia but only pretty Laura. And somehow Laura quite forgot her little airs of distance and coldness and came to meet him with radiant looks and shining eyes.

“More presents!” she exclaimed,—“Oh! isn’t Madge a lucky girl? I had a letter from her this morning and only fancy, Lady Ceespring has given her a whole set of rubies and diamonds. Isn’t she lucky?”

“Very!—You are fond of rubies and diamonds Miss Laurie?” he asked: it was a step in the right direction for him that he used the pretty pet-name by which Madge usually called her.

“Oh! rather—who would not be?” she cried. “I don’t know though, that I am so *very* fond of rubies, except that they are beautiful and of great value, and one values them accordingly. But *my* stones,” she added, with the hearty zest with which almost any girl speaks of precious gems—“are sapphires. I don’t think there is any stone on earth so lovely as a sapphire.”

Staunton drew a step nearer to her.

“Miss Laurie—” he began, in an eager, trembling voice. “I’ve no right I know—because I’m a poor devil without money or anything to recommend him—but—but—if you’ll only give me one little kind look, I—I will love you for ever, and I can give you the finest sapphires in England.”

“How—what do you mean?” she cried.

“What do I mean—? Why, that I love you, my darling,” he answered joyously, for now that he had made the plunge, he was bold enough and went ahead with his wooing right bravely and gallantly. “I know, of course, that it isn’t such a match as you ought to make, except in that I adore you,

but I don't know where you'll find anyone who will love you better, aye or half as well as I shall do—as I do," he ended triumphantly.

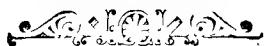
Laura Trafford looked up at the ceiling and down at the floor, aside at the window, and then to the other side at the fireplace.

"I—I—really—couldn't marry you for the sake of the finest sapphires in England," she said very demurely.

For a moment Staunton looked very blank.

"Could you marry me for myself?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Yes; I could marry you for yourself," said she softly.



CHAPTER XXIV.

A SEEKER AFTER TRUTH.

“If we engage in a large acquaintance and various familiarities, we set our gates open to the invaders of most of our time.”

--COWLEY.

WHEN Mrs. Trafford came in that afternoon followed by Colonel Coles, who had accepted the offer of a cup of tea in a very forlorn hope of picking up some shreds of gossip, she saw in a moment what had happened.

So did Colonel Coles!

With a well-meant effort to spare her daughter any little feeling of confusion in these her new circumstances, Mrs. Trafford made no scruple of dissembling; neither, in his anxiety to get at the truth did Colonel Coles. Consequently a kind of “Pull devil, pull baker” game ensued, which would have given infinite amusement to Orford had he been there to see, but which was utterly thrown away upon the audience present.

“How very cold it is to-day,” Mrs. Trafford began—“Oh!—how do you do, Sir Anthony? Bitterly cold, is it not? Er—Dear me, it is almost impossible to get one’s gloves off! Er—I hope Cox will let us have tea immediately—I am quite famishing. Er—Laura, my love, you don’t

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look very well—" eyeing her critically—then with extreme carelessness—" Have you a headache ?"

Laura turned scarlet.

" Oh ! no, Mother dear, thanks, not in the least," she answered stealing a glance at Staunton, who was wishing the old gossip at Jericho or Kamschatcha or perdition or any where except in Mrs. Trafford's comfortable and cosy drawing-room.

But Colonel Coles, having been bidden to take off his coat in the hall, had no notion of betaking himself away without either the fresh and fragrant tea and hot buttered scones for which the little widow's five o'clock gatherings were famous, or the prime bit of news which he could see for himself was to be had by waiting for, as plainly as he could see the nose on his own rubicund old countenance when he looked in the glass to shave on a morning. Therefore instead of taking warning by Laura's blushes and Staunton's dark looks, or by Mrs. Trafford's uneasy efforts at conversation, the hardened old sinner only settled himself more comfortably down in the big velvet chair into which he had dropped, and remarked affably that although the day was certainly bitterly cold, not in fact fit for a dog to be out on, it was some compensation that the room was charmingly warm and that he and Staunton were lucky enough to be receiving the blessing of Mrs. Trafford's pleasant and genial hospitality.

It is no exaggeration to say that at that moment Sir Anthony Staunton could cheerfully have snuffed the old Colonel out completely ; old Coles saw it

plainly enough, and to put the time on, began to tell a story at once. It was a good story apropos of Mrs. Hugh Antrobus, and it had the effect of somewhat relaxing the very tight tension at which the whole party seemed to be strung.

“I was calling on Mrs. Antrobus yesterday,” he began, blandly disregarding the general frost in the air—“and I found Greatorex of the Blankshire Regiment there—I think he had never been before, Mrs. Antrobus was so very profuse.

“‘I see, Colonel Greatorex, she began in her most impressive tones—‘that your BATTALION is going to be moved very shortly to *Ald-ershot*.’

“‘Oh! yes, very soon,’ returned Greatorex, ‘and very sorry we are, for we all like Blankhampton as much as we detest Aldershot.’

“‘It is very near TOWN,’ said Mrs. Antrobus, as if ‘Town’ was an essential element in every respectable person’s life.

“‘Oh! yes—that’s one of the few alleviating circumstances attending a move to such a forgotten spot,’ Greatorex answered.

“‘Yes—Er—I *so* often see your battalion mentioned in the different papers. ‘The 1st BATTALION of the Royal Blankshire Regiment, under the com-MAND of Colonel Greatorex’—and so on. ‘I don’t know, by the by,’ she added with a little airy laugh—‘*what a BATTALION is*—Is it three or four regiments?’

“‘No—there are two battalions to a regiment,’ replied Greatorex.

“‘Oh! *dear*—’ exclaimed Mrs. Antrobus in a very blank tone—‘then do you only command *half* a regiment?’

“‘You should have seen Greatorex’s face,’ Colonel Coles wound up, his visage shining with enjoyment—“I assure you, it was worth walking ten miles to see.”

Somehow the story put them all into more easy attitudes, and when Cox appeared with the tea-tray there was a merry little scuffle between Laura and her mother as to who should do the honours thereof.

“My dear child, I *like* doing it!” Mrs. Trafford cried.

“So do I. Dear Mother, *let* me do it,” cried Laura, with such evident desire in her tones, that the little widow gave way and set herself to give such entertainment to the old Colonel that he would not be following too closely the movements and doings of the pair at the tea-table.

Vain attempt! Not one glance, not one smile, not one word escaped the lynx eyes and sharp ears of the genial old man, who extracted all the pleasure and interest in his life out of the foibles and the follies, the doings and the undoings, the marryings and giving in marriage of his neighbours! He saw it all—took note of every touch of the hands in passing cups and plates to and fro, of every tender tone, of every tremor of so much—or so little—as an eyelash. Oh! he saw so well, so well; and yet he could not make his adieux and go

off quietly to retail the news abroad, for, at present, he could only surmise and conjecture that the two had really come to an understanding; so, as he had not sufficient audacity to put the question plump and plain, either to Staunton or Laura, he had no course but to hang on until something turned up which would cause the mention of the engagement, or until seven o'clock arrived, when he would have no longer any excuse for remaining.

Julia came in presently, bringing in the Damerel girls, who promptly pounced upon the old Colonel and demanded his opinion upon some trumpery bit of old china which they had picked up that afternoon for a shilling or so.

“Look here, Colonel Coles—see this! Isn’t it too lovely?” unwrapping the tissue paper which enfolded it, and bringing to light a little cracked and chipped Lowestoft bowl. “Isn’t it quite too beautiful? And Mrs. Lee guarantees that it is a bit of real *du Barri*.”

“Ah!—H’—m! *du Barri*—eh?” repeated the old Colonel, who had got his glasses out and was now holding the bit of “bigotry and virtue” under a strict scrutiny. “Well, really, Miss Damerel, I don’t think I know very much about *French* porcelain. *Rose du Barri*, is it? H’—m—well, I should have thought it was—er—that it was—er—” but for the life of him, dear old soul, he, being brim full and running over with his discovery about Staunton and Laura, could not remember exactly upon which of the English potteries to father Miss

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Damerel's new acquisition—so he broke off short and began turning the cup over and over, as if he was the sole possessor of all knowledge in that particular branch of art.

“Yes—that it was—” repeated the two girls in a breath, and with an air of hanging upon the words of wisdom. “That it was *what*, Colonel Coles?”

“Rockingham, I think,” said he, driven at last up into a corner.”

“Oh! Rockingham! Do you hear that, Elizabeth? Colonel Coles says it is Rockingham—and he knows *all* about it—” and so Miss Damerel carefully put the cup once more in its wrappings of tissue-paper, and hid it away in the recesses of her muff.

Now as the hands of the clock were fast stealing on, and he seemed no nearer to getting any authentic information, Colonel Coles began to fidget about the room, saying that he really must be off, yet not going—until at last, he found a chance of whispering to Margaret Damerel.

“I say, Miss Damerel,” he murmured, “have you heard the news?”

“No—news? *What* news, Colonel Coles?” said she in a voice which was perfectly audible throughout the whole room.

“Why—about—” and then he glanced significantly at the group on the other side of the fireplace.

Miss Damerel, without the slightest concealment,

or attempt thereat, turned her head and surveyed the group.

“Do you mean Sir Anthony?” she asked.
—“No, I haven’t heard anything about him. What is being said about him?”

By this time Sir Anthony, Mrs. Trafford, Laura, and Elizabeth Damerel had all turned to hear what was passing between Margaret and the Colonel—so the Colonel not being inclined to speak out plainly and say that he suspected Staunton and Laura had come to an understanding, began to say “good-bye” in right down good earnest.

“Yes—yes—I *must* be going, thanks,” he said as Mrs. Trafford very willingly shook hands with him —“got several shops to call at on my way home—a thousand thanks—good-bye—good-bye.”

There was a broad smile upon every face as the door opened and closed behind him.

“I didn’t hear you especially pressing the dear old chap to stay, Mrs. Trafford,” said Staunton to the little widow.

“I like Colonel Coles immensely,” she returned, “but this afternoon, he was scarcely so entertaining as usual.”

“That was a good story he told about Mrs. Antrobus though, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, very good. I wonder if he made it up?” said Mrs. Trafford in a musing tone—“I always feel, don’t you know, a little uncertain about those people who tell such good stories—always as if it is most probable that the next they tell will be at the

expense of oneself; and somehow, *nobody* really *likes* to think they are made the subject of good stories, however good-natured they may be."

"I think it is horrid. Come, Margaret," put in Elizabeth Damerel—"Good-bye, Mrs. Trafford, yes, we must go, thanks; we are dining at the Mauleverers to-night."

Mrs. Trafford froze instantly. "Good-bye, my dears," she said, in a tone of ice.



CHAPTER XXV.

PROSPECTS BRIGHTEN.

“Fix yourself upon the wealthy. In a word, take this for a golden rule through life—never, never have a friend that’s poorer than yourself.”

—DOUGLAS JERROLD.

UNDoubtedly—and I am afraid I have made the remark before, but I must be forgiven and allowed to repeat it once more—Mrs. Trafford was a remarkably ‘cute and clever little woman; in fact, she was possessed of an amount of acumen which was neither more nor less than a goodly heritage both to herself and her children—that blessed faculty of being able thoroughly to look out for “number one.”

A less clever woman—Mrs. Hugh Antrobus for instance who simply could not be named in the same breath with her, or Mrs. Mornington-Browne whose small machinations were quite pathetic in their timid and bungling simplicity—would have been not a little elated by a second brilliant marriage being arranged for one of her young ladies. Not so Mrs. Trafford! She knew better. No, on the contrary—she sent off at once for Georgie Farquhar and poured into her sympathetic ears her joy at

Laura's good fortune in becoming engaged to the man of her choice ; she praised Sir Anthony for his handsome looks, his suitable age, his devotedness to Laura, whom he seemed simply to worship.

But she said not a word of her joy and satisfaction at her pretty Laura becoming 'my lady' or of dissatisfaction that Sir Anthony had scarcely enough money to live comfortably in a quiet way and not a tenth part as much as was really necessary to keep up in a suitable way the position to which he had been born !

Her manner from first to last was indeed judiciousness itself, and—just reward—when Orford brought Madge home again, he had not been in the house five minutes before he had put matters in quite a different light.

"So the dear old chap has come to an understanding at last ?" he said. "Where are they ?"

"They are out driving, dear boy," said Mrs. Trafford, plying her knitting needles very fast.

"Oh ! I see ; well, you're very glad of course ?"

"Oh ! Marcus!"—she just gave him one expressive look and went ahead at her knitting once more.

"Ah !—Cambridge blue and purple—his racing colours ! So I needn't ask if those are for him."

"Yes, yours are finished."

"You don't mean it ! How you must have toiled at them. It's awfully good of you, you know, Mrs. Traff', and Staunton will appreciate them as much as I do. By the by, are the Aunts

coming down or is he going to take Laura to see them?"

"I don't think he has ever mentioned his Aunts," returned Mrs. Trafford, with rather a startled air, "except that, of course, I knew all along that he had those relatives. Why should they—at least, are they more to him than Aunts usually are?"

"My dear Mrs. Traff," Orford cried—"Is it possible that I have never told you about Staunton's Aunts? Bless me. Why they are the old chap's one hope of wealth and riches. They're frightfully rich—they're disgustingly rich, and Pops—Staunton, that is—is pretty nearly sure of all they possess; indeed I believe he is as sure as a man ever can be of property that is not entailed, of all that the eldest one has."

"And they are Stauntons?" asked Mrs. Trafford who was so interested by this new revelation that she forgot her blue and purple sock and let her hands fall idly in her lap.

So Marcus Orford told her everyting that he knew about the two old ladies who were to a great extent the rulers of Sir Anthony Staunton's destiny, and together they agreed—or rather Orford suggested and Mrs. Trafford agreed with him—that on all accounts it would be best and wisest to make the two old ladies as pleased with the marriage as possible, for as Orford put it—"What's the good of some other fellow coming in for the money which it is very certain they cannot take with them? I

believe," he added, with a laugh—"that Miss Lavinia who is a gay and giddy young thing about sixty-five and thinks herself quite skittish because her sister happens to be some ten years or so older, is a little difficult to manage, but lor! Mrs. Traff', if you could manage my father — and you did that, never anyone better—you can surely manage her."

She was very clever! Armed with this knowledge she quietly asked Staunton that evening "if his Aunts were able to travel?"

"Travel? Oh! yes, Mrs. Traff'" for he too had promptly asserted his rights—called her Mrs. Traff' and demanded a separate tea-tray upon occasion—"they travel all over the place, always spend the winter in the South. I rather fancy they go to Nice this year."

"Do they know of your engagement yet?"

He looked a little ashamed—"Well—er—the fact is, I hate writing letters Mrs. Traff"—and I put it off—and—and they are not very interesting old ladies and Miss Lavinia is sure to want to come—she is always dodging and contriving how she can get into my quarters—and really, you know, I just let it slide."

"But they are your nearest relatives, are they not?" Mrs. Trafford enquired, keeping her eyes fixed upon her work.

"Well, yes, that is so," he admitted.

"I think then you ought to let them know what has happened," she said gravely—"and of course, if

they wish to come and see us all—and it is very natural that they should—there is no reason whatever why they should not do so.”

“Oh! yes—yes—but I thought by-and-by—when the wedding is over and done with. You are all so busy now—I am sure you don’t want any old ladies full of whims and caprices bothering you just now.”

Mrs. Trafford laughed.

“Oh! by-and-by is no time—no time at all. I should greatly prefer, if you have no objection, to ask them to come for the wedding. I can hardly offer to put them up, but if they will do as Lord and Lady Ceespring did, it will be very much more agreeable to be acquainted all round.”

Now to tell the honest truth Staunton had been wondering time and again, how he should break the step he had taken to his aunts, who *might* take it all right but who yet might say—in the plain and cold-blooded fashion, in which only rich relations can make remarks to poor ones—that he, who had never yet been able to make his income quite cover his expenditure, must be neither more nor less than mad to dream of saddling himself with a wife who would come to him empty-handed, and he saw in an instant the long-headed clear-sightedness of his future mother-in-law’s suggestion.

“By Jove,” he said to himself—“Orford was right when he said she was one of the cleverest little women alive—yes, of course, get them here when everything is at its best for the wedding and they

can hob-nob with the Ceesprings, and there'll be no more bother—By Jove! what a head she has."

Aloud he said—"Really Mrs. Trafford, it is very good of you to think about them—I'm sure they will be delighted to come and see Laurie and all of you. I meant, of course, to ask you if I might suggest it to them a little later, but I know they will like it immensely; and I know you will like my Aunt Theodosia very much—She has always been the best of friends to me and I owe her more than I can tell you."

"I am sure I shall like *your* Aunt, Anthony," said Mrs. Trafford with her most motherly air—and when she put that on she was infinitely more attractive than any other time.

Staunton laughed outright.

"Yes, you'll like her, I know—everybody does. But to be quite candid, Mrs. Traff', Miss Lavinia really is a caution, though, of course, if anybody can get on with her, *you'll* be able to do it."

Mrs. Trafford put the tips of her fingers to her forehead and thought deeply for a minute.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," she cried at last, clapping her hands and laughing as merrily as a child, "we'll give that dear old Lord Ceespring a hint—and get him to pay a great deal of attention to Miss Lavinia. Don't you think that would be a good move?"

Staunton fairly roared with laughter.

"Oh! Mrs. Traff'—Mrs. Traff'! My Aunt

Lavinia used to—to—*dance* with Lord Ceespring in the days gone by ; Cecil Orford he was then ! Why, it would be simply the grandest joke in the world to see them meet.”

“ Then,” said she, “ we shall, I hope, have the fun of seeing the grandest joke in the world.”

But, all the same, Mrs. Trafford had no intention of risking her daughter’s prospects for the sake of the greatest joke that ever raised a laugh. Therefore she worded her letter of invitation so that it should give clear and distinct information to the two old ladies in Belgrave Square as to the man whom her niece was about to marry and whom, if they accepted her invitation, they would be likely to meet at the wedding.

The invitation was written and sent off a post later than Staunton’s letter of announcement ; and when it was gone, Mrs. Trafford sat down quietly to wait, preserving to the outer world the same modest lack of elation in her manner, such as made just ten times the impression, upon the best set of people, that all the assumption and “ bounce ” in the wide world could have done.

And Blankhampton was furious !

For the news soon spread, as Colonel Coles, although he had had the most honourable intentions of not saying so much as a single word until he really knew for certain that Sir Anthony Staunton was engaged to Laura Trafford, had when dining out that evening when he had gone away in doubt and yet not in doubt, found himself

by reason of the general dearth of news, so hard put to it for something to say, that he was obliged to run the risk of proving himself a false prophet, and so gave out what he *thought* was true as a positive fact.



CHAPTER XXVI.

A GLEAM OF TRUTH.

“We walk through the world like the blind, not knowing whither we are going, regarding as bad what is good, regarding as good what is bad.”

—SÉVIGNE.

AND during all this time the terrible scandal concerning Captain Graham’s frustrated elopement, had not been cleared up.

Of course, as a matter of fact, the time had not been very long, though it had seemed so to those immediately concerned—to little Mrs. Farquhar, who clung determinedly to her husband’s side and shrank more than ever from going out among the people, who believed her to be as bad as she knew Emily Hildersley was. If anything it seemed still longer to that miserable woman—alone except for her five little innocent children, who prattled incessantly of their father, wondered when he would come home again, who gave infinite labour and pains to the composition of long and affectionate letters to him, to the detriment of pinaflores and frocks and table-clothes, to say nothing of fingers and indeed anything else which came within reach of the ink-pot; and apart from the pain and shame of meeting their innocent eyes and answering their

innocent questions, Emily Hildersley had set herself a heavy task by trying to shift her sin upon the sinless shoulders of another woman, her friend! She had to write long and loving letters to that brave soldier, broiling under an eastern sun—to string together words of love and terms of endearment such as had no place in her heart for him—to tell him that she wore his bracelet night and day and kissed his portrait at morning and at eventide—in short, to write the whole tissue of lies by which she must if possible—now that Graham had utterly cast her off—cajole him into believing she was the true and tender wife that she was not. Aye, indeed, the time was very, very long to her, though as yet, it could only be measured by days or barely by weeks; but perhaps it dragged by the most slowly of all to the chief of sinners in the affair, Graham! To him it seemed as if the days and hours never would go by—as if the minutes lagged and loitered on their way and the very sun stood still once more.

He had so much at stake! What he called his honour for one thing—what the world called his social position for another! And he was so impatient! so impatient to see the Farquhars, husband and wife alike, sickened and worn-out by the impossibility of proving her innocence! He was so impatient to see her down—down—down in the very dust of the earth, covered with shame, loaded with dishonour! Yes, it was wicked—it was cowardly—it was despicable; yet there are a

great many wicked, cowardly and despicable men in this world, and a few even in the Profession of Honour, and these make a vast amount of suffering and sorrow for those whom they crush with the enormous weight of their own innate and ruthless power of evil. Without doubt the power of goodness is the greatest lever that moves the world; still the power of evil, of wickedness, is strong enough to overcome most things and most people, and generally it is most active when its opposite of goodness chances to be either quiescent or else very much occupied elsewhere.

He hardly expected that Farquhar would really carry the affair into court—rather, he thought he would prowl about and try to get together enough evidence to clear her from the slander which now overshadowed her, and failing to do that,—Graham never contemplated for a moment that Farquhar could do aught but fail—failing that, he would quietly take his wife away and trust to time to blot out the stains upon her fair name.

“But,” quoth Graham to himself—“I’ll follow them round and bowl them out wherever they get a hold on anyone.”

Of course, he knew that there was always the chance that Emily Hildersley would grow weary of the game and make a clean breast of the whole truth—but he was not much afraid of that coming to pass. No, Mrs. Hildersley’s stake was like his, a very big one, and there was but small fear that she would ruin herself for ever, not only in her

husband's eyes but in the sight of the whole world.

I have not said anything about the unfortunate wife of this man! Well, just at this time that meek and crushed-looking little woman was the recipient of much attention from the gay Lothario whose flirtations and love-affairs seemed to have demoralised the whole of Blankhampton society.

She had not heard a breath of the scandal concerning her husband, which had spread through the length and breadth of the city—it often happens that those most intimately concerned in a scandal are the last to hear of it! So she was at a loss to know why her husband had become so attentive to her, though she guessed it was from no good motive.

As a rule she was accustomed to drive and walk alone or with her children, excepting on Sunday when they generally went to the Parish together, she was accustomed to pay all visits alone, and generally to go to such afternoon entertainments as were going in the town by herself, as often as not meeting her husband at them and watching him pay court to Mrs. Hildersley, whom she disliked and despised beyond everything and everybody.

But now, day by day, he was to be seen driving the stanhope-phæton with his wife beside him and a couple of children with the groom on the back-seat; and as everyone could see the puzzled air with which she accepted the new state of things, her friends mercifully spared her the infliction of the truth.

True, she did think that it was rather strange that nobody seemed to call now, and that although many people stopped and spoke to her when she was alone in the street, none of them pressed her to come and see them as they had been used to do before ; yet even thinking thus she did not come any nearer to the truth in her wonderings than that it was a little strange.

So matters stood—owing to the usual lack of speed which Farquhar's lawyers displayed—*in statu quo.*

As for the Traffords,—well, now that the wedding-day was drawing so very near, they had not time for more than to add an uncomplimentary adjective to Graham's name, whenever it was mentioned, for in truth, they had their work cut out to get everything ready for the auspicious event.

Much to Mrs. Trafford's secret joy and to her outward satisfaction, Staunton's Aunts were graciously pleased to receive the news of his engagement in a favourable manner and as soon as possible very congratulatory letters came from them to Staunton expressing their joy that he was at last going to take a *serious* view of life—(that was from Miss Lavinia, whose behaviour alternated always between the extremes of goodness and giddiness)—expressing much admiration for the sweetly pretty face of Laura—(that was from Miss Theodosia)—and saying that she hoped he would not stand in the way of her making her new niece a handsome bridal present.

Then there was one from the two sisters, written by Miss Theodosia, to Mrs. Trafford accepting with much pleasure the invitation to Madge's wedding—and also one in the same hand-writing to Laura herself, in which the dear old lady expressed a hope that they might be great friends in the future and that she might not ever come to regard either of Anthony's Aunts in the light of a mother-in-law.

Mrs. Trafford was gratified and Laura jubilant, but without doubt the little lady learnt very thoroughly during that week the truth of the old saying that "He who increaseth riches increaseth care." She had increased her riches truly but the increase did add to her burden.

For first they had to see after the Misses Staunton's rooms at the Station Hotel, to draw out afresh and re-arrange all the entertainments and festivities which were to mark the joyful occasion. Then Laura had to rush off in a hurry to the dress-maker and cajole her into putting all orders and other work aside and by hook or by crook letting her have a couple of pretty dresses before the wedding-day, for naturally she was anxious to make the best impression possible upon the two old ladies on whose likes and dislikes hung so much; so it will readily be understood that the household in St. Eve's did not, nay could not, trouble themselves just then very much about the final issue of a case about which they had made up their minds long ago.

With Farquhar and Orford it was different. Farquhar found himself almost entirely deprived

of his wife, who had for the present given herself over, as might be said, body and soul, to the furtherance of Mrs. Trafford's work; and in precisely the same way did Orford find himself bereft of his Madge.

As he said, it was not of the least use talking about it or grumbling and growling about it.

“My dear boy,” was Mrs. Trafford's invariable answer, if he tried that course, “after next Thursday you will have Madge to yourself for as long as you please; till then you must submit to your fate—which is that Madge is busy and cannot come. Go away, my dear, until dinner-time.”

And in the enforced absence from his sweetheart, Orford took refuge with Farquhar and the two men got into the habit of taking long country walks together during which they discussed the great scandal over and over again, in the hope of one or other of them thinking of some way by which Graham could be brought to his knees or Mrs. Hildersley made to speak out and own the whole truth, without waiting to gain that end by the weary and tedious process of the law-courts.

But though they discussed it and turned the whole affair over from the very beginning, so often, yet they did not hit upon any feasible and reasonable plan for attaining their object.

So the days went on until the Tuesday came bringing with it Lord and Lady Ceespring and the Misses Staunton.

They came somewhat early in the afternoon and

met in Mrs. Trafford's rose-lighted drawing-room, in which Lord Ceespring looked as handsome an old gentleman as one could wish to see in a day's march, and Miss Lavinia Staunton—smothered in dark and costly furs, rouged to her eyes and wearing a veil which came to the tip of her nose,—met him with the air of a coquettish young girl of sixteen and, quite ignoring the beautiful, placid lady on the sofa beside Madge, treated him as if he was a long-lost lover come back to her feet.

“I wouldn't have missed it for a thousand pounds if I had 'em,” whispered Staunton to Farquhar, who shook himself out of a brown study and not wishing to appear absent minded replied hastily—

“Ah! no—no—to be sure not. I quite agree with you.”

A gleam of amusement came into Staunton's eyes—but the next moment his eyes, like the eyes of everyone in the room were turned to the door, which burst open to admit Orford, who came hurriedly in with excited air and looks.

“Farquhar, I want you at once,” he said, looking at nobody else—“It's of the greatest importance—come along.”

Mrs. Farquhar ran forward. “Oh! Captain Orford, what is it?” she cried.

Orford turned and looked down upon her.

“Is that you, my dear?” he said kindly—“You shall hear all in half-an-hour—it is what we have been hunting for so long, *your good name*.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

DRIVEN INTO A CORNER.

“He who devises evils for another, falls at last into his own pit and the most cunning finds himself caught by what he prepared for another.”

— METASTASIO.

WHEN Marcus Orford had got Farquhar safely outside the door of Mrs. Trafford’s drawing-room and had closed it behind them, he took him by the arm and led him downstairs to the little library, where a decent-looking man, with a face that was familiar to Farquhar, was sitting on the extreme edge of a chair holding his hat between his knees. He got up when the two gentlemen entered and said—“good day, sir,” to Farquhar, with a tip of his forelock which had so strong a savour of the stable, that Farquhar at once remembered when and where he had seen him before.

“Oh ! good day, Barnes,” he said pleasantly.

“Good day, Captain,” returned Barnes—“’ope I see you well sir ?”

“Pretty fit, thanks. Still at the cab-driving, I suppose, Barnes ?”

“Yes, sir—same as before,” the cab-driver returned—“I’m ’appy to say the gentlemen at the Barricks favours me as much as ever.”

“It occurred to me this morning, you know, Farquhar, that if I could find out the cab which was

employed that night, we might get a clue to clearing up our difficulties."

"Yes—yes—go on," said Farquhar impatiently.

"Naturally enough, I went to Barnes first; and behold Barnes is the very man."

"Go on," was all Farquhar had words to say.

"Now Barnes—to his infinite credit—is a very tidy and methodical man—which accounts for his cabs always being so neat—and Barnes makes a rule of keeping every order that is sent in, so he only had to look it out and here it is. Now, Barnes, show Captain Farquhar what you have."

Thus bidden Barnes opened a seedy-looking pocket-book and took a folded paper from between the leaves, which he spread upon the table, smoothing out the creases with both hands.

"There it is, sir—" he said.

Farquhar bent and looked at it, recognising Mrs. Hildersley's bold handwriting in an instant.

"Please send a cab this evening at eleven o'clock *without fail*, to

"MRS. HILDERSLEY

"5 Mallinbro' Terrace,"

and in one corner was the date of month and year of the evening on which the elopement had been arranged to take place.

"It is her handwriting," said Farquhar—"I wonder though, if she will swear it is simply a forgery?"

“Can’t do that, sir,” put in Barnes—“The lady brought the order ’erself and I was a-standing at my door and took it of ’er myself. ‘Good morning, Mr. Barnes,’ says she, ‘I want you to send a cab for me to-night at eleven; I’m going up to London by the mail.’

“‘Very good, mum,’ says I.

“‘And, Mr. Barnes,’ says she, ‘just stop a couple of doors away from my ’ouse, for I’m not a-going to take my little girls, and I’m afraid they might ’ear the cab stop.’

“‘Very well, mum,’ says I, ‘I’ll be particular about it’—and then the lady says, ‘good-morning,’ and away she goes as light as a bird.”

“H—m! You’re perfectly certain that it was Mrs. Hildersley, I suppose?”

“Why, yes, sir—I know Mrs. Hildersley as well as I know Captain Orford ’ere,” Barnes answered, “and perhaps you’ll ex-cuse me, Captain, but if I’d a-known I could ’ave set your mind and your good lady’s at rest, I might ’ave come forward afore, instead of waiting till Captain Orford come and ferretted me out. Of course, sir, I’ve ’eard a good deal of what folks ’as been saying—and if I’d ’ave given it a minute’s thought, I’d ’ave spoke out at once. But there, sir, I’m very sorry and I ’ope it ain’t too late as it is?”

“Not in the least, Barnes,” replied Farquhar, “but all the same, I’m much obliged for what you say. But tell us, what happened afterward.”

“Well sir, I ’appened to go myself that night,

and I drew up a couple of doors off—as Mrs. Hildersley had told me to—and whilst I was waiting your good lady came out of her 'ouse opposite and comes across the road to me, 'are you a-waiting for Mrs. Hildersley ? " says she—

" 'Yes, mum,' says I.

" 'Then,' says she—' I'll get in.'

" So in she gets and a few minutes afterwards out comes Mrs. Hildersley. 'To the station,' she says to me—and then she slips into the cab and shuts the door after her. Of course, you know, sir, I had naught to do but to drive off, though I did think it was rather a rum start. I drove along at a pretty tidy pace, for Mrs. Hildersley had kept me waiting a goodish bit and I knew there was none too much time if she wanted to catch the mail, and then just before we got to the station I 'eard a 'ammering at the winder behind me and I looked back and saw Mrs. Farquhar leaning out of the winder. 'Turn back,' says she—' Mrs.—the lady 'as forgot something of great importance; she won't be able to go to London till the morning.'

" I see then, you know, sir," Barnes continued, " that Mrs. Farquhar didn't know as I knew the other lady—so I just turned the 'orse round and drove them back again to where I took them up—and I see them go into the 'ouse together, and that's all as I know about it."

" I'm very much obliged to you, Barnes, for telling me all this, and when the whole business is settled, I'll see you again."

"Thank you, sir," said the cabman preparing to depart.

"I say, Barnes," put in Orford hastily—"did you ever drive Mrs. Hildersley any other times?"

"Dozens," returned Barnes, with a sly look.

"H—m; anywhere in particular?"

"Well, no, sir, but I used to take her up at her own 'ouse and drive her to one or two shops, and then she'd say sudden-like—'I think, Mr. Barnes, I'll go for a little drive, it's a *very* fine day.' I took her a good many of those little drives, time and again."

"Alone?"

"Oh! yes, sir; I used to drive her out a mile or two on one road or t'other—and she always used to make some excuse to get out and send me back. Either t'was a lady she wanted to call and see, or the walk 'ome would do her good, or some other excuse. I never could quite make it out, till one day, Captain Graham came down to my place and said he wanted a cab—*sharp*. I didn't 'appen to have one in except my own, so I went myself. He told me to drive to Uppling—*you'll* know the village, I daresay, gentlemen—and stop at the first big 'ouse on the right after you reach the village, and then when we got there he says—'Oh! I want to call 'ere, and then I'm going on up to the 'All. You'd better wait—or stay, I shall be a good while—perhaps you'd better go back now; ' and then he paid me and I came back. I don't know that I should ever have given it a second thought, only when I got 'ome my missus ~~met~~ me with, 'Mrs.

Hildersley's been 'ere a-wanting you and a cab; one of the servants came down with a written order, and I told her as you weren't in. However, Mrs. Hildersley, she came along 'erself and was in a rare taking at your being out and no cab in. "Dear me," she said, "isn't there *one* cab in?—I want to go to Upplingly and I'm late now." So my missis says without thinking; 'Well, mum,' she says, 'it *is* a pity, for Barnes has driven one of the officers to that very place.' And she got so red in the face, my missis thought she must have been going to meet him there."

"How was it you kept all this to yourself so long, Barnes?" Farquhar asked suddenly. "You must have known what people were saying all this time."

"No, sir—only about Mrs. Hildersley; you see, sir, if a man in my position comes forward to speak it looks as if he was after hush-money. I never went in for that yet, but as soon as I 'eard from Captain Orford 'ere that your good lady was drawn into it, then I was ready and willing to tell all I know."

So the whole truth came to light—Farquhar and Orford went off early the next morning and confronted Mrs. Hildersley with the cabman Barnes and her own written order for the cab which carried her so perilously near perdition.

Brought thus into a corner she dropped her mask of brazen effrontery and confessed the truth, not only confessed it with bitter tears and sobs of

penitence and wretchedness, but also signed a full statement of her guilt.

Armed with this, Farquhar went to the General commanding the district, and then sent on a statement and a copy of Mrs. Hildersley's confession to the commanding-officer of Graham's regiment; after this he posted him at his club in Town and also at the Blankhampton Club of which like all other officers of the garrison, he was an honorary member.

"And now," said Farquhar with infinite relish to Orford. "I've got to settle my *personal* account with the little sweep. Will you come along and see me through it?"

"I wouldn't miss it for a thousand pounds," returned Orford promptly—"Where do you expect to find him?"

Farquhar looked at his watch—"It's just three o'clock now—he'll be at his own house. I shall go up there after him, pull him out of his house and—" a significant and swishing shake of the whip he carried told all the rest.

"Well, give me ten minutes—I must just send a note to my people; I promised to be with them at half-past three."

But all the same the note which Orford hastily scrawled and despatched by a cab to the Station Hotel, was not addressed to Lady Ceespring but her lord.

"Dear father—" it ran—"Get into this cab and tell the man to drive like the devil to 26 Mallinbro'

Terrace—Farquhar is on his way to do it. Don't lose a moment. Your affectionate son, MARCUS ORFORD."

For the fiery old gentleman to bustle downstairs and get into the cab, giving his son's directions to the driver thereof, with sundry forcible and urgent additions of his own was but the work of a few minutes. What a fume he was in! He should miss it, he kept repeating to the musty old cushions and faded linings of the vehicle which had been a lady's brougham in its day—yes, it would be just like his luck if he did.

Then they turned the corner into Mallinbro' Terrace, and behold there was Marcus standing outside the gate of Number 26.

"Evidently," said the old lord with a gleeful chuckle. "Nothing has happened *yet*."

But his son met him with a decidedly doleful face.

"Farquhar's been a deuce of a time in there," he said. "And I do really believe the little sweep has made a clean bolt of it."

"Surely not," exclaimed the old lord.

"I believe he has," said Orford with intense disappointment in his tones.

They waited a little longer; the quiet street was very still, for it was not a thoroughfare. One or two ladies passed up and down and a nurse-maid with a baby in a perambulator and several children running beside her, came along, drew near and finally stopped at the gate of Number 26.

“Graham’s youngsters,” murmured Orford to his father.

The children passed in at the gate, with the exception of one, who stood still to look at the handsome old man with his velvet coat and white hair. He looked at her with interest, first because she was a remarkably pretty child, secondly because she had a great ugly weal across her fair and rounded cheek.

“What have you done to your face?” the old lord asked, not being accustomed always to stand on ceremony.

“Oh! papa did it last night,” the child answered. “Mother asked him why he never goes to the club now, and he struck at her and——” but there the story was cut short, for the nurse came back and caught the child by the hand.

“Come in this minute, Miss Evelyn,” she said sharply—“You know you are never allowed to tell tales.”

“But the old gentleman asked me,” persisted Miss Evelyn—then the nurse jerked her into the house and closed the door with a bang behind them.

A moment later it was flung open and Farquhar with a man in plain clothes followed by a policeman, came out; Farquhar had a face as white as chalk and as ghastly as death.

He shuddered as he reached the place where Lord Ceespring and his son were standing.

“I was just too late,” he said hoarsely—“he shot himself just before I reached the house.”

“ And the wife ? ” asked Orford.

“ She pretends nothing—she stood and looked at him as he lay there, and then she drew up one sleeve and looked at her arm ! It was black and blue—‘ I forgive you , ’ she said in a half-whisper—‘ I forgive you *all* now . ’ ”

“ It was a loathsome sight , ” Farquhar ended, with another shudder—“ And please Heaven, I may never see such an one again. Is that your cab ? Will you give me a lift home. This business has undone me utterly . ”

So they turned their backs upon the house where lay all that was left of a man, who had wrought much wickedness in this world and very little good ! But only his wife—his widow now—knew that Emily Hildersley had sent him warning of the steps she had taken, that in reality hers was the hand which had helped him to his death.

When the old lord and the two younger men got into the cab which had taken Lord Ceespring to Mallinbro’ Terrace, the driver asked a very natural question, for he touched his hat and said—“ Where to, sir ? ”

Marcus Orford looked at his father—Lord Ceespring looked at Farquhar.

“ Anywhere in the town will do for me , ” Farquhar said in reply to the look—“ I left my wife with Lady Ceespring and was to meet her at Mrs. Trafford’s this afternoon . ”

“ Oh ! yes, Mrs. Traff’ has an afternoon party to-

day," struck in Orford. "You'll show there won't you, sir?"

"Yes, I think so," replied the old lord, not very brightly. "I promised faithfully to go early and stop late--but—

"But you want a brandy and soda," suggested Farquhar—"I know I do--badly."

"Let us go back to the hotel then," said Lord Ceespring.

"Or stop at the Golden Swan—it won't waste so much time," put in Orford, with decision.

At any other time he would naturally have suggested calling at the club, but he knew if they once showed there and their news was known, there would be no party at Mrs. Trafford's for them that afternoon. Therefore, not being inclined to give that up, he hustled his father and Farquhar along and managed to get them to St. Eve's before the clock of the Parish struck the hour of five.

They found Mrs. Trafford's room full even to suffocation, the piano jingling above, tea-cups rattling below, and the hubbub of voices everywhere.

Mrs. Trafford herself, who naturally kept an eye on the staircase, was the first to perceive them. She told Lord Ceespring that his wife particularly wanted him—"To introduce somebody to you, I think"—she whispered.

She bade Farquhar see after his spouse, who had been twice to the door to look for him "and who, I assure you, has had quite a little court this after-

noon; *everybody* has congratulated her and made such a fuss over her! But I am glad to say she takes it all with a good deal of gentle dignity”—and the little woman nodded at him, as if the gentle dignity was a special grace and virtue of hers with which she had endowed the poor girl who had suffered so cruelly for the wickedness of others.

Then as Farquhar disappeared in the throng she turned her head and made a captive of Orford, who could not get through the crowd until some ladies near the doorway moved, but who was craning his neck to see if he could discover his sweetheart's whereabouts.

“ My dear boy,” she said to him—“ how very late you are! what *have* you been about? ”

For once Marcus Orford had no answering smile for the gay little lady, who had been at such great pains to make Blankhampton “a little pleasant to him.”

“ I've been on a very unpleasant errand, Mrs. Traff',” he replied—“ And it turned out infinitely more unpleasant—unpleasant, no, worse than that—than any of us dreamt of.”

“ Connected with that horrible man, of course,” she said in a questioning tone.

Orford shuddered.

“ Poor little Georgie is avenged, Mrs. Traff'—Graham shot himself this afternoon, half-an-hour before Farquhar reached his house.”

All the light faded out of Mrs. Trafford's keen

little face, giving place to that frost of horror which invariably seems to freeze the features into immobility, when a murder or a suicide comes near to us in our daily life.

“Dead—shot himself,” she repeated in a low and awe-struck tone, “Oh ! Marcus, is it true ? Do you mean it ?”

“Yes—Farquhar went just after it happened—saw Mrs. Graham—saw *it*—Ugh ! Mrs. Traff’ but it’s a ghastly end to come to, even for a—for such a one as he was.”

And then he told her all the details so far as he knew them, and how his father had noticed the livid weal across the child’s fair face, and the half-given explanation thereof.

“But you won’t put off the wedding for it ?” she cried in alarm.

Orford laughed outright.

“Scarcely !”

“That is all right—I was so afraid, for a moment that you might think it necessary.”

“Oh ! no—not the least necessity in the world. It is not as if he had ever been a friend of any of us. For my part, although one doesn’t like to say much of a dead man, he was a fellow I never could stand at any price.”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ADAMANT.

“ Joy cannot unfold the deepest truths. Cometh white-robed Sorrow, stooping and wan, and flingeth wide the doors she must not enter.”

—GEORGE MACDONALD.

MRS. HUGH ANTROBUS was eloquent upon the several important items of interest which were swaying the feelings of Blankhampton people about the time of Marcus Orford’s marriage.

Concerning the crushing defeat which Mrs. Hildersley had sustained in her attempt to slip her sin upon the shoulders of her innocent friend, Mrs. Hugh was more than eloquent, she was impressive.

“ When I remember,” she said—“ how that woman came and con-fided in *me*,” uttering the last word with an emphasis almost worthy of John, by Divine Providence, Lord Bishop of the Diocese—“ How she worked upon my sympathy and played upon my feelings—How she wormed herself into my confidence—Well, I can only be thankful—*thank-ful*—that my eyes were opened in time.”

There were those among her hearers who thought—and perhaps were not far wrong in thinking so—that Mrs. Hugh’s sympathies and also her feelings were very well able to take care of themselves; Mrs. Hugh, however, did not gather that such thoughts had an existence and babbled blandly on.

“ Yes—we went to the reception the day before the wedding! Oh! they only had relatives at the

breakfast—You see Mrs. Trafford's rooms are very SMALL! Oh! the presents were very lovely—most costly indeed; and such a number of them. Really, I almost think she had more even than To-To. And we went to the wedding, of course. Oh! we would'nt have missed it for anything, and of course, they *all* came to *our* wedding—" with one of her little oily laughs—"Yes—the bride looked very charming—for a *dark* bride, you know. And her dress was really lovely—I could'nt help thinking all the time how well *Polly* would have looked in it. And her manner was very sweet, not at all that of a girl making such a *very* good marriage, for really it *is* a *splendid* marriage, when you come to think of it.

"There were only six bridesmaids—I think Laura looked the best of them all—" Mrs. Hugh said Lau—ras as if she had called the girl so from her cradle—"Of course, she looked very much elated with *her* engagement. Ah! it's wonderful the way some people have of managing these sort of things. Dear Mrs. Traf-FORD has such a winning manner, and with *men* that goes for so much."

Thus Mrs. Hugh babbled blandly on to those of her friends who were not admitted into such high places as herself, while Polly sat by looking lovely and dreaming of a day when she should go to the altar in snowy white and pearl embroideries and give her troth to a Peer of the Realm.

That meant, of course, Lord Charterhouse—who between ourselves, was a nice young gentleman for whom to live in dreams. For not many days after

this, he went down to the River House one afternoon when Mrs. Hugh and Polly were alone, and after spending an hour with them, over tea and buttered muffins, said in a casual kind of tone to Mrs. Hugh just as he was leaving :

“ Oh ! by the by, Mrs. Antrobus, I shall not see you again, for some little time, for I go off on my long leave to-morrow.”

For quite half a minute there was dead silence so that Polly could hear the loud beating of her own heart and fancied that the others could do the same. Then Mrs. Hugh gasped out—“ Oh ! really—” in such an utterly blank tone that even Polly noticed it in the midst of her pain.

As for Lord Charterhouse he felt—oh ! such a “ howler”—as he called it—at that moment, for he could not help seeing the pain on poor Polly’s pretty frightened-looking face.

“ If it wasn’t for Nell,” he thought, even then more than inclined to waver between the two women who had charmed him—“ I would—yes, hanged if I wouldn’t. But there’s Nell——”

“ I hate going away—” he said to Mrs. Hugh by way of extenuation—“ but, of course, long leave has to be taken whether one likes it or not.”

“ Oh ! has it really ? ” remarked the older lady recovering her habitually bland tones.

“ I daresay you will have a very good time,” put in Polly bravely ; Polly was always to be depended upon for the keeping up of appearances, even under the most painful or embarrassing circumstances.

ADAMANT.

“Oh! pretty fair!” returned Mr. Winks shrugging his shoulders as if he did not much like the prospect of what was before him. “Of course, when one immolates oneself on the altar of family duty and affection, one may be supposed to get a certain amount of comfort out of the immolation. Well, then, good-bye, Mrs. Antrobus; thank you for all your kindness and hospitality to me—I hope I may be able to return it some day. And I hope you’ll have a merry Christmas every one of you.”

Then he dropped her hand and turned to take Polly’s—Mrs. Hugh suddenly thought she heard Baby crying upstairs and with a hasty “excuse me, a moment, I think some accident has happened to Baby,” ran, or to be accurate waddled hastily out of the room, leaving the two young people together.

“Don’t forget me, Miss Antrobus,” said he, holding her hand very fast within his own.

Polly looked wistfully at him with her pretty blue eyes, as if she would fain read his meaning in his looks rather than in his words.

“Perhaps,” she said very sadly, “it will be better if I do not remember you, Lord Charterhouse.”

He flushed a vivid guilty scarlet all over his pink and white face at her words.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said in a low voice—then bent down and kissed the soft white hand he held, once, twice, three times. “Good-bye my Mayflower,” he said—“good-bye.”

When Mrs. Hugh came back again, having after a long search found Baby sitting on the kitchen-

table eating bread and butter and jam, she found Polly standing quietly looking into the fire.

“Never mind, Polly, dear,” she said. “He will come back again—of course, it is very tiresome his *having* to go on leave but—”

“Buoy yourself up with no false hopes, mother,” said Polly. “Lord Charterhouse will never come back again to—to—us.”

And Polly was right; for just a month later his immolation on the altar of family duty and affection was made public property in a certain column of *The Times*: indeed there were two announcements of great interest to Blankhampton folk in that column on the same day.

“On the 2nd at Blankhampton, Sir Anthony Staunton, Bart., Major the 25th Dragoons, of Nest Abbey, Chalkshire, to Laura, younger daughter of Mrs. Trafford, St. Eve’s Blankhampton and the late Rev. Humphrey Trafford, Rector of Gatherton.

“On the 3rd, at St. Peter’s, Eaton Square, Lord Charterhouse to Lady Helen Temple.”

“Polly wouldn’t hear of it,” said Mrs. Hugh in the strictest confidence to her most intimate friends—“And I assure you, poor fellow, he was quite broken-hearted when he went away. I was not at all surprised for I *quite* expected he would do *something* of this kind. However, Polly was like adamant—*ad—a—mant.*”

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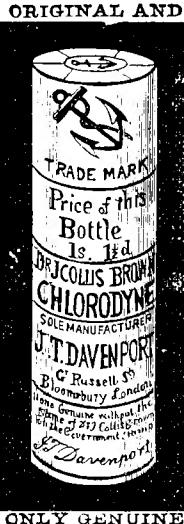
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